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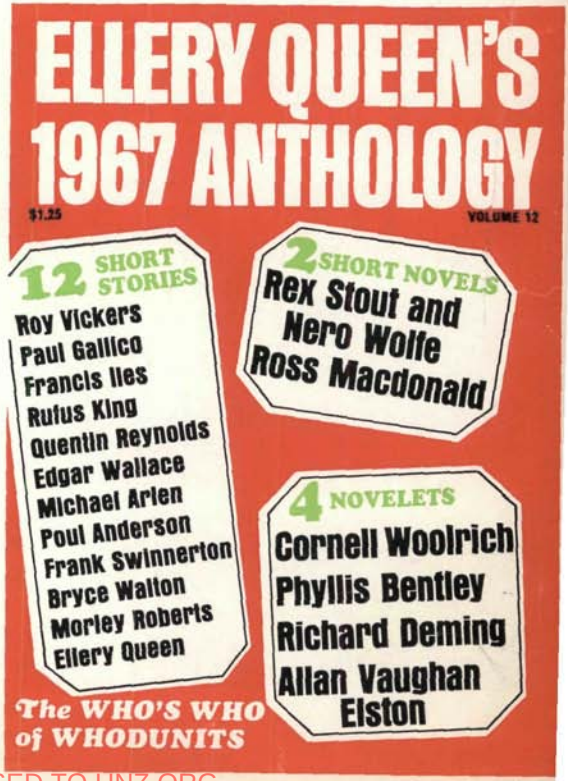

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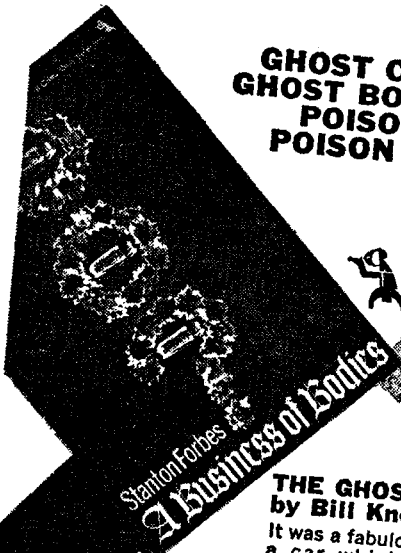

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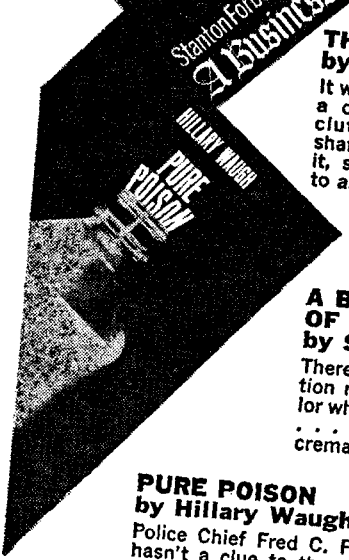

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THE END OF THE END

by MICHAEL INNES

"I WON'T SWEAR," APPLEBY SAID, "that we haven't been mildly rash. But we'll get through." He shifted gears cautiously. "*With luck*, we'll get through . . . Damn!"

The exclamation was fair enough. The car had been doing splendidly. At times, indeed, it seemed to float on the snow rather than cut through it, and when this happened it showed itself disconcertingly susceptible to the polar attractions—polar in more than one sense—of the bank rising steeply on its left and the almost obliterated ditch on its right.

And now Appleby, steering an uncertain course round a bend, had been obliged to pull up—and to pull up more abruptly than was altogether safe. There was a stationary car straight in front, blocking the narrow country road.

"Bother!" Lady Appleby said. "It's stuck. We'll have to help dig it out."

Appleby peered through the

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windshield. Snow was still lightly falling through the gathering dusk.

"It won't be a question of helping," he said. "If you ask me, it's abandoned. I'll investigate."

He climbed out of the car and found himself at once up to his knees in snow.

"We've been pretty crazy," he said, and plunged toward the other car.

Judith Appleby waited for a minute. Then, growing impatient, she climbed out too. She found her husband gazing in some perplexity at the stranded vehicle. It was an ancient but powerful-looking sedan.

"Abandoned, all right," Appleby said, and tried one of the doors. "Locked, too. Not very helpful, that."

"What do you mean, not very helpful?"

"If we could get in, we could release the brake and perhaps be able to shove it aside. It's not all that snowed in is it?"

"Definitely not." Judith peered at the wheels. "Engine failure, probably. But it stymies us."

"Exactly. The driver got away while the going was good. Rather a faint-hearted bolt, if you ask me, and some time ago. There are footprints going on down the road. They have a good deal of fresh snow in them."

"I suppose that must be called a professional observation. Let's get back into our own car. I'm cold. But why didn't the silly ass stay put? It's by far the safest thing to do. And one can be perfectly snug in a stranded car."

She had kicked some of the snow from her feet and climbed back into her seat. She closed the door beside her.

"It's beautifully warm in here. Stupid of him to stagger off into the night that way."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Appleby got in beside his wife. Their car was rather far from being a conveyance of the modest sort; the abandoned car was markedly humbler and less commodious. Appleby refrained from pointing this out.

"I do find it a shade puzzling," he said. "But our own course is fairly simple. We'll go in reverse as far as that last crossroad. It can't be more than a mile . . . Good Lord, what's that?"

"I rather think—" Turning in her seat, Judith looked through the rear window. "Yes. It's something sublimely simple, John dear. An avalanche."

Appleby looked too. "Avalanche" was perhaps too grand a word for what had happened. But there could be no doubt about the fact. The bank behind them was extremely steep; nevertheless, a surprising depth of snow had contrived to gather on it, and this had now precipitated itself upon the road.

Appleby had to waste little time estimating the dimensions of the resulting problem. Their car was trapped.

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"Never mind, darling." Judith, when cross, usually adopted a philosophical tone. "There's some chocolate in the glove compartment. And we can keep the engine running and the heater on. It's a good thing you filled up."

"A good thing *I* filled up? You said—"

Appleby broke off, having glanced at the gasoline gauge. It was not one of those occasions on which expostulation serves any useful purpose.

"There's under a gallon," he said. "And we haven't got an emergency can. Civilization is always lulling one into a false sense of security."

"But, surely, that's all right? Just ticking over, the gas will last, won't it, for hours and hours?"

"Undoubtedly. Into the small hours, in fact."

"The small hours?"

"Two in the morning. Perhaps three."

"I see." Judith, who had been contentedly breaking up a bar of chocolate, seemed to lose heart a little. "John, when the heater stops, how long will the car take to—to get cold?"

"Oh, a quite surprisingly long time. Fifteen minutes. Perhaps even twenty." Appleby picked up a piece of chocolate. "I think," he said rather grimly, "you'd better get out the map. And I'll turn on this inside light. It's getting dark."

"We *are* a surprisingly long way from the main road," Judith said presently. "I'd no idea it was so far."

"Um," Appleby said.

"There's that last signpost—at least, I think it is."

"It's a reasonable conjecture."

"I'd forgotten it was so deserted a countryside. There doesn't seem to be a hamlet, or even a house, for miles. But wait a minute." Judith's finger moved across the map. "Here's something. 'Gore Castle.' Only it's in a funny sort of print."

"That means it's a ruin. They use a Gothic type for places of archeological or antiquarian interest."

"But I don't think Gore Castle *is* a ruin—or not all of it. I'm sure I've heard about it."

Judith seemed for the moment to have forgotten their depressing situation.

"Get out the *Historic Houses*."

Appleby did as he was told. The work was very much Judith's *vade mecum*, and she flicked through its pages expertly.

"Here we are," she said. "Yes, I was quite right. Listen. 'Three miles south of Gore. Residence of J. L. Darien-Gore, Esq. Dates partly from Thirteenth Century. Pictures, tapestries, furniture, stained glass, long gallery—' "

"I never heard of a medieval castle having a long gallery," Appleby remarked.

"It must be the kind of castle that turns into a Jacobean mansion at the back. But let me go on.

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'—long gallery, formal gardens, famous well—' "

"Famous what?"

"Well. A wishing well, perhaps, or something like that. 'April 1 to October 15—Thursdays only, two to six. Admission 2/6. Tea and biscuits at Castle. Catering facilities at Gore Arms, Gore.' I knew I was right."

"About the biscuits?"

"About it's being inhabited. This Darien-Gore person—and I'm sure I've heard the name—"

"It does seem to recall something."

"Well, he certainly lives there. We only have to find the place and introduce ourselves."

"I'd say we only have to find the place. No need to put on the social act. The chap can't very well thrust us back into the night. Not that the question is other than academic. We can't possibly set out to find Gore Castle. It's almost dark already, and we'd be off the road and lost in no time. That mightn't be a joke. The drifts must be pretty formidable by now."

"But, John, I can see the castle. It's positively beckoning to us."

"*See* it? You're imagining things. Visibility is presently going to be zero."

"Over there to the right. Let your eye travel past the back of the stranded car. You see?"

"Yes—I see. But—"

"J. L. Darien-Gore, Esq. has turned on a light—perhaps high in the keep, or something. It's rather romantic."

"If it's high in the tower, it may be anything up to five miles away."

"We can follow the light for five miles."

"My dear Judith, have some sense! Darien-Gore—if it is he—may turn it off again at any moment. We're able to see it at all only because it has stopped snowing—"

"Which is encouraging in itself."

Appleby had produced a small pair of binoculars, and was focusing them on the light.

"I think it possibly is the Castle," he said, and slipped the binoculars back into his coat pocket. "But we might go only a hundred yards and then lose it because of some configuration in the terrain."

"Bother the terrain. And I'd say we can each carry a suitcase."

"Dash it all!" Very incautiously Appleby allowed himself to be diverted by this maneuver. "We can't turn up on the fellow's doorstep as if he ran a blessed hotel."

"I think it would be only considerate. Otherwise, Mr. Darien-Gore would have to send grooms and people to rescue our possessions."

"Sometimes I think you are beginning to suffer from delusions of grandeur."

But Appleby was fishing two suitcases from the rear of the car. He'd taken another careful look at that light, and decided it couldn't

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be very far away. The venture was worth the risk.

"At least we've got a torch," he said. "So come on."

They plunged into the snow. But Appleby paused again by the abandoned car. If the fellow had just contrived to steer into the side of the road, they themselves would probably have managed to get past the obstruction, and so be on their way by now.

Appleby felt the radiator. He looked again at the surface of the road immediately in front. The snow was deep enough. But it wasn't that deep. He shook his head, and trudged on.

.

"Not at all," Mr. Darien-Gore said. "The gain is all mine—and my guests'. Most delighted to have you here."

Jasper Darien-Gore was in early middle-age. Spare and upright, he would have suggested chiefly an athlete who has carefully kept in excellent physical condition—if he hadn't more obviously and immediately impressed himself as the product of centuries of breeding.

His appearance was as thoroughly Anglo-Norman as was that of his Castle. And he had the air of courteous informality and perfect diffidence that masks the arrogance of his kind.

"And I do hope," Darien-Gore added, "that this will prove a reasonably comfortable room."

Appleby looked around him in appreciation. It was, at least, a reasonably splendid room. If it was comfortable as well—which seemed very likely—the comfort hadn't been secured at the expense of disturbing the general medieval effect.

The walls were hung with tapestries in which sundry allegorical events dimly transacted themselves; logs crackled in a fireplace in which it would have been possible to park a small car; there was an enormous fourposter bed. It was no doubt one of the apartments that tourists could view (on Thursdays only) for half a crown.

Appleby wasn't without an awkward feeling that he ought to produce a couple of half crowns now.

"Ah!" Darien-Gore said. "Here is my brother, Robert. He has heard of the accession to our company, and has come to add his welcome to mine."

It seemed to Appleby that these last words had been uttered less by way of politeness than of instruction. Robert Darien-Gore was not looking very adequately welcoming. He was much younger than Jasper, equally handsome, equally strong and athletic in suggestion, and decidedly colder and more reserved. Heredity, perhaps, had dealt less kindly with him. His, in fact, was a curiously haunted face—and not the less so from its air of now quickly assuming an appropriate social mask.

"Robert," Jasper said, "let me introduce you to—" He broke off.

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"By the way, I think it is *Lady* Appleby? But of course! I was sure I recognized your husband. One never knows whether it is quite civil to tell people one has spotted them from photographs in the public prints. Robert—Sir John and Lady Appleby. Sir John is Commissioner of Metropolitan Police."

"How do you do. I'm so glad you found your way to Gore Castle. It might have been awkward for you, otherwise."

Robert was producing adequate interest. It couldn't have been put higher than that.

"We couldn't possibly have been luckier," Judith said. "We had a guide book, you know, and it said 'Tea and biscuits at Castle.' I had a wonderful feeling that we were saved."

"And so you are, Lady Appleby." Jasper Darien-Gore, who appeared to be more amused than his brother, nodded cordially. "The kettle, I assure you, is just on the boil."

Judith, Appleby thought, was made to take this sort of situation in her stride. One couldn't even say that she was putting on a social act. She was just being her natural self. Judith, in fact, ought to have married not a policeman but an ambassador.

"I hope that being held up for a night isn't desperately inconvenient," Robert said. "And I really came in to ask at once whether we could do anything about a message. The snow has brought our telephone line down, unfortunately—and it's the same, it seems, at the home farm. But I think we might manage to get one of the men through to the village."

"Thank you," Appleby said. "But there's no need for anything of the sort. Nobody's going to miss us tonight, and I'm sure we can get ourselves dug out in the morning."

"Then, for the moment, I'll leave you." Robert turned to his brother. "They're amusing themselves in the gallery again. I'll just go and see they do nothing lethal."

With the ghost of a smile Robert left the room.

"*Thank* you!" Judith was saying—not to her host, but to her host's butler, whose name turned out to be Frape. The fact that Frape himself had brought up their suitcases was a simple index of the hold that Judith was getting on the place.

"*There*, please." Judith had pointed to an enormous expanse of oak—it might have been a refectory table of an antiquity not commonly come by—on which the suitcases could modestly repose.

She turned to Darien-Gore. "It's so good of you," she said. "Sheer pests hammer at your door, frost-bitten and *famished*"—Judith quite shamelessly emphasized this word—"and you don't bat an eyelid."

"I had no impulse to bat." Darien-Gore was amused. "And, of course, one mustn't—not on one's own doorstep. But, come to think of it, I almost did—bat, I mean—shortly

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before you came. You see, somebody else has shown up—a fellow who had to abandon his car—"

"The car that prevented ours from getting through, I expect," Appleby said.

"That may well be. And a perfectly decent fellow, I imagine. Yet I had an obscure impulse to get rid of him—or at least to murmur that Frape would fix him up comfortably in—"

"I should be very willing to, sir." Frape, who had been giving a little ritual attention to the appointments of the room, interrupted his employer. "And it's not, I think, too late. Nothing very definite has been proposed."

"Thank you, Frape, but I think not." Darien-Gore had spoken a shade sharply, and he now waited until the butler had withdrawn. "Frape finds the fellow not quite qualified to sit on the dais, as one might say. No doubt he's right. But of course he'll dine with us. Under the circumstances, anything else would not be the hospitable thing. Perhaps I was put off a bit when he told me his name was Jolly. Difficult name to live up to—particularly, of course, when your car has been stranded in the snow."

"I wasn't terribly clear that his car *was* stranded," Appleby said. "He didn't say anything to suggest it had broken down?"

"Now that you mention it, I don't recall that he did. Oh, by the way." Darien-Gore, who had appeared to be about to take his leave, now changed his mind, and walked over to a heavily curtained window. "I'm terribly sorry that, in the morning, you won't find much of a view. This room simply looks out on the inner bailey—an enclosed courtyard, that's to say. Perhaps you can see it now. The sky's cleared a little, and there's a moon."

He drew back the curtain. "Step into the embrasure, and we'll draw these curtains again. No need to turn out the lights."

Appleby and Judith did as they were told. The effect was suddenly to enclose them in a small darkened room, one side of which was almost entirely glass. And as a moon had certainly appeared, they were looking out on a nocturnal scene very adequately illuminated for purposes of picturesque effect.

Directly in front of them the keep or tower of the Castle was silhouetted as a dark mass—partly against the sky and partly against the surrounding snows. It was a bleakly rectangular structure at present encased in a crisscross of metal and wooden scaffolding. This added to its grim appearance. It was like a prison that had been thrust inside a cage.

"You seem to have quite a job of work on hand, over there," Appleby said.

"Perfectly true. The weather has halted it for a time, but during the autumn we had masons all over the Castle. The Office of Work pays

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for most of it, I'm thankful to say."

Darien-Gore laughed whimsically. "Odd, isn't it? My ancestors built the Castle to defy the Crown, more or less. And now the Crown comes along, tells me I'm an Ancient Monument, and spends pots of money propping up my ruins."

"Is that the famous well?" Judith asked. She pointed downward to the courtyard.

The inner bailey was a virgin rectangle of untrodden snow—part in shadow and part glittering in the moonlight. In the center of it a low circular wall, about the size of a large cartwheel, surrounded a patch of impenetrable darkness.

"Yes, that's the well. I see you must really have been reading that guide book, Lady Appleby. It's certainly what everybody wants to see. We put a grid over it when the Castle's being shown—otherwise, we might have a nasty bill for damages one day."

"But why is it famous?" Judith asked. "Is there some legend connected with it?"

"Nothing of that kind. What's out of the way about it is matter of sober fact. It oughtn't really to be called a well. Think of it as a shaft—an uncommonly deep one—going down to a subterranean river, and you get the idea of it. The guide recites *Kubla Khan* to them, you know. To the tourists, I mean."

"How very strange!" Judith said. "'*Where Alph, the sacred river, ran*'?"

"Exactly. And *through caverns measureless to man.* There's some vast underground system there in the limestone. Ever been to those caves outside Rheims, where you walk for miles between bottles of champagne? It's said to be like that here—only on a vastly larger scale. And, of course, no champagne."

"Can it be explored?" Judith asked. "By the kind of people who go potholing—that sort of thing?"

"Not possible, it seems. Cast anything down my well, and it's gone forever. And that doesn't apply merely to orange peel and threepenny bits. If you wanted to get rid of an elephant, and no questions asked or askable, the well would be just the place. It's had its grim enough uses in the past, as you can guess."

Rather abruptly, yet with a touch of achieved showmanship, Darien-Gore opened the curtains again.

"We dine at eight," he said. "Before that, people often gather for an hour or so in the gallery. At this time of year it serves its original purpose very well. All sorts of games are possible, and we even manage a little archery. I don't know whether either of you happens to be interested in that sort of thing."

"I've tried archery from time to time," Judith said. "And I'd like to improve."

"Then you must have a go at it under Robert's instruction. He's quite keen, I'm glad to say."

Darien-Gore paused, as if uncer-

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tain whether to proceed. "As my small house party consists of intimates, perhaps you will forgive me if I say something more about my brother. He is moody at times. In fact, his nervous health has not been good over the past year, and allowances must sometimes be made for him. I think you will like his wife, Prunella. She's a courageous woman."

"And who else is staying at the Castle?" Judith asked. She had received with the appropriate mild concern the confidence just imparted to her.

"Well, there's the unexpected Mr. Jolly, whom you've heard about. By the way, we've put him in the room next to yours. My glimpse of him doesn't suggest that he will be quite as entertaining as his name sounds. Then there's my very old friend Ned Strickland and his wife Dorcas—"

"How nice!" Judith said. "We know them quite well."

"That's capital—and shows, my dear Lady Appleby, how well house parties arrange themselves at Gore Castle. The only other guest is a chap named Charles Trevor, who does something or other in the City. We were at school together, and have been trying to revive an old acquaintance. And now I'll leave you. The bells do ring, by the way—and just at present there even appear to be young women who answer them. But I don't know what my father would have thought of running Gore Castle on a gaggle of housemaids."

"A gaggle of housemaids." Appleby was opening his suitcase with an expression of some gloom. "I suppose one might call that rather a territorial joke. Would you say I'd better put on this damned dinner jacket?"

"Yes, of course. And it's lucky I brought a decent frock."

"Our fellow waif-and-stray, Mr. Jolly, won't have a dinner jacket."

"You'll find that one or another of the Darien-Gores will keep him company by not dressing. But the other men will."

"Oh, very well." Appleby had little doubt that it would turn out just as Judith said.

"We're lucky to have hit upon such civilized people. And I look forward to seeing the Stricklands."

"My dear Judith, General Strickland is an amiable bore."

"Yes, but he's a very old friend of the family. Get him in a corner and he'll tell you all about the Darien-Gores. I'm curious about them."

"I'm sure you are. But I doubt whether there's a great deal to learn. I've a notion that Jasper was once a distinguished athlete—"

"Yes, that rings a bell. Something aquatic—high diving or water polo or—"

"No doubt. And he's simply lived on his income ever since. As for the melancholic Robert, perhaps

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the less one learns about him the better."

"Just what do you mean by that?" Having found the dress she wanted, Judith was shaking it out on its hanger. "You don't think he's mad, do you?"

"I'd hardly suppose so. But when a chap like Jasper Darien-Gore starts apologizing in advance for his brother, one has to suppose there's something rather far wrong. And I've an impression that Robert, and presumably his wife Prunella, aren't simply here on a week-end visit. In some obscure way Robert has taken refuge here. And you and I, my dear, butting in the way we have butted in, have very precisely the social duty to discover nothing about it."

"Perhaps we have. Only it's not in your nature, John, to refrain from looking into things—just as you're doing now."

That was fair enough. Turning out his pockets as he changed, Appleby had come upon the binoculars he had first used in their search for Gore Castle. He had drawn back a curtain and was using them now to take a closer look at the inner bailey.

The moon was rising, and the sky had blown clear. Straight opposite, the keep was no longer a mere dark mass within its scaffolding. One could make out something of the detail of its surface, pierced by narrow unglazed windows.

Below, the carpet of snow, untrodden even by the tracks of cat or bird, surrounded the sinister well.

"Come along," Judith said. "We mustn't skulk."

Appleby closed the curtain and put down the binoculars. They left the room together. A few paces down the corridor there was a half-open door on their right. And it was true that Appleby could seldom "refrain from looking into things." He did so now.

A middle-aged man, sharp-featured and indefinably furtive, seemed to have turned back into the room when he was just about to leave it. He was now transferring from a small suitcase to his jacket pocket what looked like a rather bulky pocketbook.

"Well, well!" Appleby had walked on for some paces before he murmured this. "Not only do we know the Stricklands, we know Mr. Jolly as well."

"Nonsense! I took a glance at the man. I'm certain I've never seen him before."

"All right. But *I* know Mr. Jolly quite well. Possibly he doesn't know me."

"I don't see how—"

"I know him by sight, I ought to say. I've had the advantage of studying his photograph."

"You mean he's a criminal?"

"He's thought to be. Perhaps it wouldn't be fair to put it stronger than that."

"Then he's in for a fright when he discovers who you are."

"I suppose so. Yes, I suppose

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Darien-Gore is bound to tell him."

"Hadn't *you* better warn Darien-Gore—I mean, that he's sheltering somebody who may be after the family jewels?"

"Perhaps so." Appleby frowned. "Only, it mightn't be altogether tactful. You see, Mr. Jolly's line happens to be blackmail."

"How revolting! But surely—"

"I think," Appleby said, "we go up this staircase to reach the long gallery."

"One moment, my lady, if you please." Frape had stepped forward rather dramatically out of shadow. "You would find it safer to come up by the staircase at the other end of the gallery."

"You mean that this one may tumble down?" Judith looked in some alarm behind her. It had been a stiff climb.

"Nothing of that kind, my lady. But to enter the gallery by this door—"

Frape broke off as a sharp twang made itself heard from the direction in which he was pointing.

"That would be Mr. Robert," he said. "Of it might be Mr. Charles Trevor. Both draw a powerful bow—if that indeed be the correct expression among archers . . . Ah!" The twang had made itself heard again.

"I think I see what you mean," Appleby said. "It wouldn't be healthy to get in the way of *that*."

"Precisely, sir. But in a moment the round—if they call it that—will be over. You and her ladyship can then enter. Meanwhile, sir, may I ask if you have seen anything of Mr. Jolly?"

"Yes—and I imagine he's coming along."

"I am glad to hear it, sir. It had occurred to me that he might be lingering awkwardly in his room."

Frape turned to Judith. It was clear that he regarded her as worthier of the august confidence of an upper servant than was her husband.

"To my mind," Frape murmured, "an error of judgment on Mr. Robert's part. Persons are best accommodated according to their evident station. Mr. Jolly would have done very well in the servant's hall. And I could have answered for it that there would have been no complaints."

"I'm sure there wouldn't," Judith said.

"Precisely, my lady. My own service has always been in large establishments and among the old gentry. In such circumstances one becomes accustomed to entertaining odd visitors from time to time. Even chauffeurs are occasionally odd. And lady's maids, I am sorry to say, are becoming increasingly so—as your ladyship is doubtless aware."

"I haven't had one since I came out. So I wouldn't know." Judith spoke with a briskness that doubtless characterized, Appleby thought, the old gentry rather than the new. But now, from beyond the door

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over which the communicative Frape stood guard, there came a small sound as of polite applause. "They must have finished the end."

"The end, my lady?"

"It's called an end, Mr. Frape, not a round."

Appleby, who would have addressed Frape as Frape, and who knew nothing about ends, felt that Judith had smartly scored two points at once.

"In other words," he said, "we can safely go in."

"Exactly so, sir." And Frape, with a grave bow, opened the door of the long gallery.

"As you'll notice, we manage fifty yards—which is quite a regular ladies' length. And there's plenty of height, as you see."

Prunella Darien-Gore was explaining this to Judith—and with a shade of desperation, Appleby thought. Her husband, who ought to have been giving these explanations, seemed to be sunk in a somber reverie.

"Mr. Trevor, will you be good enough to show Lady Appleby?"

"Yes, of course." Charles Trevor was stout and flabby; one would have guessed that he was without either interest or skill in athletic pursuits. But now he slipped on brace and tips, and with a casual certainty sent one arrow into the gold and two into the red.

"Robert?" he said challengingly.

Robert Darien-Gore came out of his abstraction with a start, and picked up his own bow without a word. Appleby, standing beside Robert's wife, was aware of a curious tension in her as she watched. He spoke out of an impulse to relieve this tension in some way.

"I know nothing about archery," Appleby said. "But it's my guess that your husband is pretty good?"

"He used to be." Prunella, Appleby saw, was digging her nails hard into the palms of her hands. "It came second only to his rock and mountain climbing."

She gave a suppressed gasp, as if suddenly aware that she was thinking of her husband as somebody out of the past.

"Yes," she said. "Robert is first-class. Watch."

Her sudden faith in her husband was justified. Robert shot three arrows and bettered Trevor's score. Into his final shot he appeared to have put unnecessary force. The shaft had buried itself deep in the heart of the target and it would take exceptional strength to pull the arrow out.

In the middle ages, Appleby remembered, an arrow from an English longbow could pierce the thickest armor. And there was something alarming in this one: its feathered tip was still quivering as Appleby watched.

"Capital, my dear Robert!" General Strickland, who had been talking to Jasper Darien-Gore in a corner, set down a glass in order to

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applaud vigorously. "Let's see if Trevor can beat that—eh? Just let me retrieve the things."

He turned to Appleby. "We don't manage two ends, you see. It would lose us five yards we can't spare. So we shoot only from this end. Nobody do anything careless, please!"

The General hurried off down the length of the gallery.

"Ned isn't in Robert's class," Mrs. Strickland said to Judith. "Nor in this Mr. Trevor's either. But he can give Jasper a good match. I'm very much afraid he may want to now. Aren't you famished, Judith?"

"Quite famished. I suppose we're waiting for Mr. Jolly."

"Mr. Jolly—whoever is he?"

"The other gate crasher. He seems to have made the haven of Gore Castle about an hour before John and I did."

"How very odd. I hope he isn't keen on archery too. I find it tedious—and a little unnerving."

"Unnerving, Dorcas? I suppose it has a lethal background—or history. But—unnerving?"

"I think it's that terrible twang—like something going wrong with a piano string. But here they go again."

General Strickland had retrieved the arrows, and now Charles Trevor was again addressing himself to the target. He sent his first arrow into the gold.

"There!" Mrs. Strickland said. "Didn't you hear? Like something happening to the poor old family Bechstein—or perhaps to one's granddaughter's cello—in the middle of the night. Have you never been wakened up by just that?"

"I have." Appleby, who had been accepting a drink from Frape, paused beside her. "But, you know—"

"*Stop!*"

It was the vigilant Frape who had given this shout. And he was only just in time. As Trevor drew back the bowstring, the door at the farther end of the gallery had opened, and Jolly had walked in. Not unnaturally, he stood transfixed, staring up the gallery at Trevor.

And for an alarming moment Trevor himself swayed oddly, and with a queer and involuntary movement seemed almost to train his arrow on the newcomer. Then he let his bow gently unflex.

There was a moment or two of mild confusion, followed by introductions. These last were not without awkwardness. Jolly seemed indisposed to make any claim upon the social graces. He gave each of the women in turn what was no doubt meant to be a bow, but had more the appearance of a wary cringe.

His glance tended to go apprehensively toward Trevor—as it still well might—and then travel furtively toward Robert. Frape stood in the background. It was evident that the proceedings were very far from enjoying his approval.

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"Lady Appleby," Jasper was saying. "And Sir John Appleby. Sir John is—"

"How do you do?" Without too great an effect of abruptness, Appleby had cut explanations short. "We're in the same boat, you and I. My car got stranded behind yours. Was it just the snow that held you up, or did you have engine trouble?"

"A little bit of one thing and a little bit of another." Jolly, whose speech was no more polished than his manner, eyed Appleby narrowly. "Acquainted with these people here, are you?" he asked.

"I happen to know General Strickland and his wife. But not the others."

"I'm a stranger here myself. They invited me to stay the night. Affable, you might say. Not that they could well do anything else. Plenty of room in a place like this."

"Clearly there is."

"And no need to stint, either. Money in a big way, eh? And a touch of real class as well. I've a fancy for that. High aristocratic feeling. Sense of honor and so on."

Jolly gestured at the line of family portraits which hung in the long gallery. "Eyes of one's ancestors upon one, eh? There's something I like about that."

"No doubt you find it professionally advantageous. By the way, I gather you've met Mr. Trevor before?"

"Trevor?" Jolly was startled. "Who is he? Never heard of him."

"He's the man who was about to shoot when you came into the gallery. I got the impression that you were looking at each other with some kind of recognition."

"Nothing of the kind. What I recognized was that he very nearly killed me."

"I don't know that he did quite that. But it was an awkward moment, certainly. It was natural that he should be agitated—that he should be a little agitated. I think I must go and have a word with him."

"Does one require a license," Appleby asked casually, "to play around with bows and arrows?"

"Good Lord, no!" Charles Trevor glanced at Appleby in surprise—and also, perhaps, with a faint impression of quick alarm. "Why ever should one?"

"It has occurred to me that the things are just as efficient weapons as pistols and revolvers—more efficient than some. I've seen that you can put an arrow through the pinhole—isn't it called?—on that target. I doubt whether you could do the same with an automatic."

"I've never handled a pistol in my life, so that's no doubt true."

"Ah! Now, suppose that incident a few minutes ago had really resulted in an accident. Suppose you'd fired—or does one say shot?—dead at this fellow Jolly. You'd actually have transfixed him, wouldn't you?"

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"Really, my dear sir! I don't know that it's very pleasant to—"

"He'd have been pinned to the wall, like a living butterfly that some cruel child—"

"Dash it all—" Not unreasonably, Trevor seemed outraged by this macabre before-dinner chat.

"I was only thinking, you know, that if one had sufficient cause really to hate a man, an arrow might be a more attractive weapon than a bullet. But you must forgive me. I'm a policeman, remember. My mind runs on these matters from time to time. And—do you know? —I can almost imagine that some people *would* hate Mr. Jolly—quite a lot. I'd say he's a type one rather likes to forget about. Supposing when one *had* forgotten him—"

"I care nothing about this fellow Jolly. And I certainly don't think he's worth discussing."

"I was going to say that when the Jollys of this life *do* bob up again, the desirable thing is probably to keep one's head. As for talking about him—well, he's at least not a very conversable character himself. Look at him now."

Jasper and General Strickland were competing against each other, though in rather a casual way. The others were engaged in desultory conversation behind them. Jolly, however, had retired to a window seat at the side of the gallery. And he began, as Appleby looked, to fumble in a pocket. He might have been hunting for a cigarette case or for matches. But what he brought out was a dark, bulky pocketbook.

The pocketbook was already familiar to Appleby. He had seen it, through that open bedroom door, going into Jolly's pocket earlier in the evening. Having produced it, Jolly did nothing more. He simply sat immobile, with the pocketbook in his lap.

Appleby turned back to the others. He was just in time to catch a swift impression of the Darien-Gore brothers, momentarily immobile, gazing into each other's eyes.

Then Jasper drew back his bowstring, and there followed the twang to which Dorcas Strickland took such exception. The shaft flew wide. There was a moment's silence in the gallery. It was broken by Frape.

"Dinner is served!"

"I shall be delighted to have coffee in the gallery," Mrs. Strickland said as she re-entered it. "I don't know a more charming room. But I make one condition—that those tiresome bows and arrows be put away. Judith, don't you agree?"

"I think I do. If the men find more talk with us boring, they can go away and play billiards."

"Prunella, dear, you are the hostess." Mrs. Strickland spoke a shade sharply. "The onus is on you."

"But of course!" Robert's wife had walked into the room absent-mindedly. Now she turned round with a start. "Only you needn't be

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anxious, Dorcas. There's never any archery after dinner. Jasper would as soon think to settle down to talk about money. Everything has been put in the ascham."

"The what, dear?" The three women were alone, and Mrs. Strickland was helping herself to coffee.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Prunella had again started out of inattention. "The ascham is the name given to the cupboard where bows and things are kept. There it is."

She indicated a tall and beautiful piece of furniture, perhaps Elizabethan in period, which stood against the wall. "I think it must be named after some famous archer."

"Roger Ascham," Judith said, a shade instructively. "He wrote a book called *Toxophilus*. He was a schoolmaster."

"I am sure he was an excessively dreary person." Mrs. Strickland was studying a row of bottles. "Why, in bachelor establishments, are women of unblemished reputation invariably confronted with Crème de Menthe? Never mind. There's a perfectly respectable brandy too."

"I am sure there is." Prunella spoke rather drily. "And won't you have a cigar?"

"Only at home, dear. That has always been my rule."

Judith, too, found herself some brandy. So far, the evening had not been a success, and it appeared unlikely that it would perk up now. Dinner, indeed, had been so constrained an affair that the tactful thing would probably be an acknowledgement of the fact, made on a whimsical note.

"John and I did our best," she said. "But we were foreign bodies, I suppose. It all *didn't* seem to mix terribly well."

"One must blame that really *somber* Mr. Jolly," Mrs. Strickland said. "He disappointed me. One so seldom has an opportunity of meeting that sort of person—unless one goes canvassing at election time, or something of that kind. But he *quite* refused to be drawn out."

"I'm afraid Robert was rather silent." Prunella was gazing into her untasted cup of coffee. "But he has been depressed ever since he—he resigned his commission. Of course, Jasper is very good—"

"One can see that they are devoted to each other," Judith said.

"Yes—and Jasper wants Robert to take over the running of the estate. I hope he will. It would be so much better than—than simply hanging around."

There was an awkward silence, resolutely broken by Mrs. Strickland.

"Jasper did his best with us—at dinner, I mean. He can talk so well about the history of Gore Castle. Of course, I've heard parts of it before. But he told us some things that were quite new to me. About the ghost that walks in this gallery. I'm sure I never heard of that. Do you think it goes about pierced by

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an arrow? I wouldn't be at all surprised. And the superstitition about the well at midnight—"

"There's a superstition about the well?" Judith asked.

"Yes. Didn't you hear? And I'm quite sure that *I* wouldn't care—but here are the men. I had a notion they wouldn't linger very long."

"A very good dinner," General Strickland said to Appleby. The two men were sitting in a corner of the gallery apart. "A very good dinner, indeed."

"It might have been a shade more lively, I thought."

"Lively? I don't believe in dinners being lively. Not with a Margaux like that. Chatter spoils one's concentration, if you ask me."

"Margaux, was it? Judith said it tasted rather like cowslip wine."

"My dear boy, she was perfectly right. She always is. That's the precise description for the bouquet of Margaux. Ever been to the chateau?"

Strickland paused to sniff at his brandy, then went on. "I must tell you, one day, of the week I spent there in '17. Absolutely amazing. Not that the place is anything much to look at. Not a patch on Gore. Built by some fellow called Lacolonilla about a hundred years ago, and might be round the corner from my own house in Regent's Park . . . How does Gore Castle strike you, by the way?"

"It's an impressive place—particularly to tumble into out of the snow. And perhaps a shade oppressive, as well."

"Never struck me that way, I must say. But then I've known it, you see, man and boy . . . Bit of a cloud over it at the moment, eh?"

"So I feel. But Judith and I are unexpected guests, you know. I told her, earlier this evening, that curiosity isn't on the calendar."

"And she said that, with you, it's never off?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, she did." Appleby paused to light a cigar. "But, Strickland—do you know?—I'm not sure I wouldn't like any gossip there is. I've a notion there's something—well, building up. Any idea what I mean?"

General Strickland looked about him cautiously. But the two men were unobserved—except by the ancestral Darien-Gore portraits on the walls.

"That fellow Charles Trevor seems deucedly uneasy," he said. "And what's he doing here, anyway? Knows his spoons and forks, and all that. In fact, he was at school with Jasper. But not our sort. Not our sort, at all."

"I suppose not." Appleby was amused by this blunt social judgment. "But I imagine he's more our sort than Mr. Jolly."

"Well, that's different. Very decent, unassuming chap, no doubt. Some sort of counter jumper or motor salesman, eh? Jasper didn't

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want to bother the servants with him."

"So I've gathered—if it was Jasper. I rather think it may have been Robert. There's a faint conflict of evidence on the point."

"Well, it comes to the same thing, my dear boy. The brothers are tremendously thick. And since Robert and Prunella came to live here—"

"Why did they come?"

"Ah—that's telling."

"I know it is."

"Appleby, you really feel there's something—well, *happening* in this place?"

"Happening, or going to happen. Don't you feel—?"

"That it could be stopped?"

"Well, not by me. I just don't know enough." Appleby paused to look into his brandy glass. "Were you going to tell me about Robert?"

"My dear chap, *I* don't know. Nobody does—or wants to, I should hope. It looked damnably ugly for a time. And then it ended on what you might call a minor note."

"Ended? What ended?"

"Robert's career, I suppose one has to say. He left the army. And the thing was dropped."

"The thing? What thing?"

"God knows, something there turned out not to be sufficient evidence about, I imagine." General Strickland broke off, and again looked about him. This time it was at the line of portraits silent on the wall.

"A poor show of some sort," the General said, "Hard on a decent family, eh? Not much wrong with them since the Crusades, and all that."

"You're a romantic at heart, Strickland. And *noblesse oblige* is all very well, no doubt." Appleby was speaking seriously. "But that particular sense of obligation is an open invitation to pride."

"And pride?"

"Is an open invitation to the devil." Appleby was still serious.

"Here's Jasper coming down the gallery. He *looks* proud, I'm bound to admit. But he's aging, too. It's just struck me. Still, he's kept his figure and his strength. A great athlete, you know, as a young man. But not the sort that falls into a flabby middle-age . . . I think he's coming over to talk to you. I must go and have another word with your wife. Astonishing thing, you two turning up here like that. Quite astonishing."

"Delightful that you know the Stricklands," Jasper Darien-Gore said. "Won't you and your wife treat it as an inducement to stay on for a day or two?"

"It's most hospitable of you, but I'm afraid we can't."

Appleby felt no reason to suppose that Darien-Gore had spoken other than merely by way of civility. There was, indeed, something faintly distraught in his manner which emphasized the point. "As a matter of

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fact, we must try to get away fairly early."

Appleby hesitated, and then took the plunge. "Unless, that is, I can be useful in any way."

He waited for a response, but none came. Darien-Gore was looking at him with a frozen and conventional smile. He simply mightn't have heard.

Having begun, however, Appleby went on. "You'll forgive me if I'm talking nonsense. But it has just occurred to me that in that fellow Jolly you may find yourself rather far from entertaining an angel unawares. And I happen to know—"

"Jolly?" Darien-Gore repeated the name quite vaguely. "An odd chap, I agree. But he has been getting on quite well with Robert. In fact, they've been making some kind of wager—I've no idea about what."

"I don't think I'd be inclined to lay any wager with Jolly. Winning and losing might prove equally expensive."

"And he says that he must try to get away quite early, too. Ah, here he is."

This was not wholly accurate. Jolly had been standing some little way across the gallery, and without showing any disposition to approach. But Jasper had made a gesture which constrained him to come forward.

"Mr. Jolly," he said, "you must really leave us in the morning, if your car can be got away? It would be pleasant if you could stay a little longer."

As he produced this further civility, Jasper gave Appleby a hard smile. "And, of course—" He broke off. "Ah, thank you, Frape."

Frape's appearance was with a large silver tray on which he was carrying round a whiskey decanter, glasses, ice, and a siphon. The Darien-Gores, it was to be supposed, kept fairly early hours. Frape was looking particularly wooden. He had presumably overheard his employer's latest essay in hospitality.

"Very much obliged," Jolly said. "But fast and far will be my motto in the morning. All having gone well, that's to say." He gave a laugh which was at once insolent and apprehensive. "Yes, all having gone well."

Jolly looked indecisively at the tray—and at this moment Robert Darien-Gore came up. Silently he poured a stiff drink, added a splash of soda water, and handed the glass to Jolly.

Jolly, who already seemed slightly drunk, gulped, hesitated, gulped again. The two brothers watched him fixedly. He returned the glass, only half emptied, to the tray, and waved Frape away. Frape's eyes met Appleby's for a moment, and then the butler moved silently off.

"I know just when I've been given enough," Jolly said. "And it has been the secret of my success."

He turned to Appleby, and gave him a look of startling contempt. "Pleasant to meet people one has

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heard about," he said. "Isn't that right, Sir John?"

"Decidedly. And I'm glad, Mr. Jolly, that I've been here to meet you tonight."

"I know, you see, just how much I can take." Jolly pointed at Appleby's glass, as if further to explain this remark. "That, and fast and far, are the secrets of my success."

"Come and have a final word with my wife, Mr. Jolly."

Quite firmly Appleby took Jolly by the elbow and led him away—leaving the Darien-Gores looking at each of them silently. But Appleby took no more than a few paces toward Judith.

"My man," he said, "let me give you a word of advice. Stick, on this occasion, to your motto—fast and far. And make it quite clear that you have forgotten the other secret of your success."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about life and death. Good night."

"Good night, madam—good night, sir—good night, my lady." Frape, standing at one of the doors of the long gallery, responded to such salutations as he was offered while the company dispersed. His employer and his employer's brother were the last to leave the gallery; to each of the Darien-Gores, as he very slightly bowed, he gave a grave, straight look.

Jasper hesitated at the head of the staircase, half turned as if about to speak, then thought better of it and moved on.

Robert had already vanished; in a moment Jasper's shoulders, squarely held, vanished too, and then his head.

Frape closed the door behind him, turned, and looked down the long gallery. From its far end the archery target regarded him like a staring and sleepless eye. He moved down the gallery, set glasses on a tray, placed a screen carefully in front of the great fireplace, turned off the lights, so that it was now by the flicker of firelight that he was lit, paused to look thoughtfully at the line of portraits on the wall.

He went over to the ascham and saw that it was locked. He moved to a window, drew back a curtain, and stood immobile before the wintry scene.

Small clouds were drifting across a high, full moon, so that pale light and near-blackness washed alternately over the landscape. To his left, and from very high up, he had an oblique view of the inner bailey; this came into full light for a moment, revealing the well still amid its unbroken carpet of snow.

Frape remained motionless, with the firelight flickering behind him . . .

"Snubbed," Appleby said.

"Never mind, darling. This is a most comfortable bed. And do hurry. I'm extremely sleepy." Judith

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put down the book she had been reading. "You mean you scrapped that business about having a social duty not to discover anything?"

"More or less." Appleby took off his black tie and tossed it on the dressing table. "At least, I decided that I ought to offer our host some sort of warning about Jolly. What I was after was a little candor before trouble blows up."

"What sort of trouble?"

"Unfortunately, I can't make more than a guess at it. If I could do more, it might be possible for me to act. Anyway, our friend Jasper refused to play along. So did Jolly."

"Jolly! You talked to him?"

"He's up to mischief, and I had a shot at scaring him off. It didn't work. You'd take him to be rather an apprehensive little rat, but in fact he has nerve—plenty of nerve. It amuses him to be operating—and he certainly is operating—right under my nose."

"He's gathered who you are?"

"Quite clearly he has. But I don't seem to carry around with me much terror of the law."

"There's something between him and that man Charles Trevor."

"Yes, I think there is." Appleby was now in his pajamas.

"If you ask me, Trevor is quite as nasty as Jolly. Perhaps they're confederates."

"Perhaps."

"You say something's going to happen. What?"

"Well, for one thing, you and I are going to sleep." Appleby turned out a light. "For another—but this is where I'm beginning to guess—there's going to be some hard bargaining here at Gore. And not of a kind, unfortunately, in which I can very well act as honest broker."

"It sounds most unpleasant."

"I'm sure it is. But I don't see that there is anything I can do. I must think twice before compounding a felony, I suppose. And that's why, in a way, I don't really want to learn more. We didn't stagger in here out of the snow in order to start blowing police whistles and insisting on an open scandal. Or that's how I see it at the moment. It may be different in the morning."

Appleby crossed to the window, drew back the curtain a little way, and half opened a casement. He moved back across the room, got into bed, and turned out the last light. The room was quite dark, with only a narrow band of moonlight falling on a wall and across the bed.

"And now you're going straight to sleep," he said.

The band of moonlight had moved a little; it now caught the corner of a picture. Otherwise the room was in absolute darkness. The only sound was Judith's breathing. Then—

Twang!

Appleby found that he had come awake with a start, and that his

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mind was groping for the reason. And the reason came to him, like an echo on the inner ear, as he sat up and switched on a bedside lamp. Judith was still fast asleep.

He picked up his watch and looked at it; the time was just two o'clock. He slipped out of bed, went over to the door, and listened intently. He came back, put on his dressing gown, felt in his open suitcase, and produced a pocket torch.

Returning to the door, he opened it gently, went out, and closed it quietly behind him. The corridor before him was dark and cold. He let the beam from his flashlight first play down its empty length, and then circle until it found the door of Jolly's room. He went over to this, listened for some seconds, and then switched off the torch and cautiously turned the handle of Jolly's door.

The door swung back with a faint creak upon blackness. He switched on the torch again, and the beam fell on Jolly's shabby suitcase, open and untidy. The beam circled the room and fell on the bed. It had been turned down at one corner. But nobody had slept in it.

Appleby closed the door—and as he did so, he heard faint sounds from the end of the corridor. They might have been slippered footfalls. He turned in time to see a dim form and a flickering light disappear round a corner. Muffling the torch in the skirt of his dressing gown, Appleby followed.

Under these conditions, Gore Castle seemed tortuous and enormous. Several times Appleby lost all trace of the figure in front of him. And then, suddenly, he oriented himself. The newel by which he was standing belonged to one of the two staircases leading to the long gallery.

He looked up. An unidentifiable male figure—like himself, in a dressing gown, but holding a lighted candle before him—was disappearing into the long gallery itself. Appleby climbed rapidly.

The gallery, when he reached it, was part in near-darkness and part floating in moonlight. At its far end stood the archery target, commanding the long narrow place.

Appleby rounded a screen, and the man with the candle stood before him. It was Frape. His hand was on the door of the ascham.

"What's this all about, Frape?"

The candlestick in Frape's hand jumped. But when he turned round it was to look at Appleby steadily enough.

"The door of the ascham, sir. It seems to have been left unsecured, and to have been banging in the night. The fault is mine, sir. I am deeply sorry that you, too, should have been disturbed by it."

"Nonsense."

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"You are talking nonsense, Frape, as you very well know."

"I assure you, sir—"

"Open the door of the thing and

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let's have a look. It's no more than you were going to do for yourself."

Silently Frape turned back and opened the door of the tall cupboard.

"Commendable," Appleby said. "Everything as accountable as in a well-ordered armory. Those two empty places in the rack, Frape—I think they mean two arrows missing?"

"It might be so, sir. I cannot tell."

"Two gone." Appleby lifted a third arrow from the rack and poised it in his hand. "Simply as a dagger," he said, "it would make a pretty lethal weapon—would it not?"

"I really can't say, sir."

"But there's a bow missing as well?"

"There may be, sir. I have never counted them, so am not in a position to say."

"Frape, drop this. It can do nobody any good. You came up here—didn't you?—because you were disturbed by the same sound that disturbed me. Somebody was shooting one of those damned things. And we both know that nobody practices archery in the small hours just for fun."

"There is the possibility of a bet, sir. Gentlemen have their peculiar ways."

"For heaven's sake, man, stop behaving like a stage butler. You know, even better than I do, that there's some deviltry afoot in this place."

"Yes . . . yes, I do." Frape passed a hand over his forehead, like a man who gives up. "Only, I must—"

At this moment the creak of a door being opened made itself heard from the far end of the gallery. Appleby was about to turn toward the noise when Frape restrained him.

"Don't turn round," Frape said in a low voice. "I can see without being detected . . . I think somebody is watching us through the door."

He began to fiddle with the door handle of the ascham. "Yes," he said in a louder tone. "The catch is defective, sir, and so the door has simply been blowing to and fro. There is always a draft in the gallery."

Once more Frape lowered his voice. "He's opened it wider. It's Mr. Trevor. He's shut it again. Now he's gone."

"You mean to say"—now Appleby did turn round—"that this fellow Trevor has come up here, *peered in at us in a furtive manner*, and made himself scarce again?"

"Yes, sir. And it is certainly another indication that things are not as they ought to be."

"Quite so. And the question is, where do we go from here? Have you any idea where we might find that fellow Jolly?"

"In his bed, I suppose."

"Jolly's bed hasn't been slept in.

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Were you aware of any coming and going about the place after the company broke up last night?"

"I have an impression, sir, that there was some talk going on in the library until about midnight. Whether Mr. Jolly was concerned, I don't know. But would I be correct in assuming that you are aware of something seriously to Jolly's discredit?"

"That puts it mildly, Frape. The man's a professional criminal."

"Then I suggest that he may have left the Castle. Mr. Darien-Gore may have caught him in some design that has resulted in Jolly's beating a hasty retreat. It would be perfectly possible. The wind has dropped, and I think there has been no more snow."

As he said this, and as if to confirm his impression, Frape crossed over to a window.

"It's a possibility, certainly," Appleby said. "And I wonder—"

"Sir"—Frape's voice had changed suddenly—"will you be so good as to step this way?"

Appleby did so, and found himself looking obliquely down into the moonlit inner courtyard. It was a moment before he realized the small change that had taken place in the bailey.

Between the well and one side of the surrounding courtyard there was now a line of tracks in the snow.

"Mr. Darien-Gore's binoculars, sir. He keeps a pair in the gallery."

Appleby took the binoculars and focused. There could be no doubt about what he saw. A simple line of heavy footprints led straight to the well.

And there were no footprints leaving the well.

"Ought I to rouse Mr. Darien-Gore, sir?" Frape asked, as Appleby put down the binoculars and turned away from the window.

"Certainly you must." Appleby moved across the gallery to the great fireplace. "And everybody else as well. But it will be rather a chilly occasion for them, particularly for the ladies. Would you say, Frape, that this fire could be blown up quickly?"

"Decidedly, sir. A little work with the bellows will produce a blaze in a few minutes."

"Then this will be the best place in which to meet. You had better get on to the job . . . But one moment." Appleby held up a hand. "You could not have been mistaken about the identity of the man peering in on us a few moments ago?"

"Certainly not. It was Mr. Trevor."

"Nor could you have had any motive for deceiving me in the matter?"

"I quite fail to understand you, sir."

Appleby shrugged. "Do you think Mr. Trevor might still be outside that door, hoping that we shall leave by the other one?"

"I can't imagine any reason for such a thing."

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"Can't you? Well, I propose to put it to the test—by going down the one staircase, through the hall, and up the other one now. You will stay here, please, and blow up the fire."

"I don't see that—"

"Frape, you're far from being in the dark about what we're up against. Please do as I say."

This time Appleby waited for no reply, but left the gallery by the door beside the target, and ran downstairs, playing his torch before him. As an outflanking move it seemed a forlorn hope, but in fact it was startlingly successful.

When, a couple of minutes later, he returned breathlessly into the gallery by the other door, he was hustling ahead of him a figure who had in fact still been lurking there.

But it wasn't Charles Trevor. It was Robert Darien-Gore.

"All right, Frape," Appleby said. "Get everybody in here. But give them a few minutes to get dressed —and get dressed yourself."

He turned to Robert, who was wearing knickerbockers and a shooting jacket. "You mustn't mind my staying as I am," Appleby said. "It might be a mistake if you and I wasted any time in beginning to work this thing out."

"Good God!" General Strickland said, and put down the binoculars. He was the last of the company to have accepted Appleby's invitation to scrutinize the inner bailey. "The fellow walked deliberately out to the well and killed himself. And in that hideous way."

"It isn't," Mrs. Strickland asked, "some—some abominable joke? He can't, for instance, have tiptoed back again in his own prints in the snow?"

"I'm afraid not." Appleby, who was planted before what was now a brisk fire, shook his head. "Robert Darien-Gore was good enough to accompany me down to the inner bailey a few minutes ago. We didn't go right out to the well—I want those tracks photographed before any others are made; but I satisfied myself—professionally, if I may so express it—that nobody can have come back through that snow. Whatever the tracks tell, they don't tell that."

"The snow on the parapet," Trevor said rather hoarsely, "on the low wall, I mean, round the well—seems to have prints at one point too."

"Precisely. And the picture seems very clear. There is one person, and one person only, who is missing from Gore Castle now—an unexpected guest like myself: the man Jolly. Whether deliberately or by accident, he has gone down the well. And I believe you all know what *that* means."

"By accident?" Strickland asked. "How could it have been an accident?"

"I can't see how it could possibly be," Judith Appleby said. "No sane

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man would take it into his head to go out in the middle of the night—"

"He was a bit tight," Jasper Darien-Gore said. "I don't know if that's relevant, but it's a fact. Frape, you noticed it?"

"Most emphatically, sir. Although not incapacitated, the man was undoubtedly tipsy."

"He must have decided to go back to his car." Prunella Darien-Gore broke in. "He thought he'd got outside the castle, and he went blundering through the snow—"

"It's not impossible," Appleby said. "Only it doesn't account for Jolly's *climbing up on the lip of the well.* Face up to that fact, and suicide is the only explanation—or would seem to be. But Mr. Robert has another theory. You may judge it bizarre, but it does fit the facts. Frape, do you remember saying something to me about a bet?"

"Yes, sir. It was in a slightly different connection. But the point is a very relevant one, if I may say so, sir."

"And I think you remarked that gentlemen have their 'peculiar' ways?"

"I did, sir. I trust the observation was not impertinent."

"According to Mr. Robert, Mr. Jasper Darien-Gore himself happened to recount at the dinner table some legend or superstition about the well. It was to the effect that notable good luck will be won by any man who makes his way to the well at midnight, stands on its wall, and invokes the moon."

"Does *what?*" General Strickland exclaimed. "Some pagan nonsense, eh? God bless my soul!"

"It's perfectly true." Jasper spoke slowly. "I did spin that old yarn. And I can imagine some young man —a subaltern or undergraduate, for instance—who might have taken it as a dare. But not that fellow Jolly. He wasn't the type. It doesn't make sense."

"Unfortunately, something further happened." Appleby still stood in front of the fireplace; he might almost have been on guard before it. "Mr. Robert—so he tells me—made some sort of wager with Jolly. Or perhaps he did no more than vaguely suggest a wager. He was trying, as I understand the matter, to entertain the man—who was not altogether in his element among us. Have I got it right, Mr. Robert?"

Most of the company were standing or sitting in a wide circle round Appleby. But Robert had sat down a little apart. He might have been assuming, quite consciously, an isolated and alienated pose—rather suggestive of young Hamlet at the court of his uncle Claudius. He had remained silent so far, but now he replied to Appleby's challenge.

"Yes," he said. "Just that. I said something about a bottle of Jasper's Margaux if Jolly could tell me in the morning that he had done this stupid and foolhardy thing. I repent it

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bitterly now. In fact, I hold myself responsible for the man's death."

"Come, come," General Strickland said kindly. "That's a morbid view, my dear Robert. You were doing your best to entertain the fellow, and what has happened couldn't be foreseen."

"It isn't the truth! It can't be!" Prunella had sprung to her feet in some ungovernable agitation. "He still wasn't that sort of man. He was calculating, cold. I hated him."

She turned to her husband. "Robert, you're not hiding something, shielding somebody?"

"Prunella, for God's sake control yourself." Robert made what was almost a weary gesture. "It's a queer story, I know. But there it is."

"Which puts the matter in a nutshell."

Appleby had taken a single step forward, and the effect was to make him dominate the people in the long gallery.

"It's a queer story," Appleby continued, "but it's conceivable. And there isn't any other in the field. Not unless we have a few more facts. But as it happens, we *have* more facts. The first of them is a bow shot in the night. Strickland, would you mind stepping through that door at the end of the gallery and bringing in anything you find hidden behind it?"

General Strickland did as he was asked, and came back carrying a bow.

"It's a bow," he said, a shade obviously. "And there's an arrow there too."

"Precisely. And somebody was deeply concerned to return them to the ascham here within the last hour. Frape is convinced that person was Mr. Trevor. So perhaps Mr. Trevor somehow lured Jolly up on the lip of the well, and then—so to speak—shot him into it. One moment!"

Appleby stopped Trevor on the verge of some outburst. "Another fact is this: Jolly was, to my positive knowledge, a professional blackmailer. And his arrival here wasn't fortuitous—it was by design. Moreover—but this is conjecture rather than fact—he and Mr. Trevor were not entirely unknown to each other—"

"*That's* true." Charles Trevor was a very frightened man. "I had an—an encounter with Jolly in the past. Suddenly coming upon him here was a great shock. But it wasn't—"

"Very well. Suppose Frape didn't see Mr. Trevor peering through that door. Suppose Frape wanted to shield—"

"Of course Frape saw *me*. And then *you* discovered me. And now Strickland has found the bow and arrow." Robert Darien-Gore got these statements out in a series of gasps. "I haven't been sleeping. Last night I knew it wasn't even worthwhile going to bed. So I passed the time repairing one of the horns of that bow, and feathering an ar-

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row. Then I brought them back here."

Looking round the company, Robert met absolute silence. "I give you all my word of honor as a gentleman," he said, "that I did not shoot Jolly with an arrow."

There was another long silence, broken only by an inarticulate sound from Prunella.

"We can accept that," Appleby said gently. "But you did kill him, all the same."

"Jolly came to Gore Castle in the way of trade," Appleby said. "His own filthy trade. He had papers he was going to sell—at a price. I don't know what story these papers tell. But it is the story that failed to see the light of day when Robert Darien-Gore was forced to leave the army. Jolly, I may say, made a sinister joke to me. He said he knew when he'd been given enough; he knew just how much he could take. He was wrong."

"This must stop." Jasper Darien-Gore spoke with an assumption of authority. "If there is a case for the police to investigate, then the local police must be summoned in the regular way. Sir John, I consider that you have no official standing in this matter. And it is an abuse—"

"You are quite wrong, sir." Appleby looked sternly at his host. "I am the holder of a warrant card, like any other officer of the police. And on its authority I propose to make an arrest on a specific charge. Now, may I go on?"

"For God's sake do!" Prunella cried out. "I can't stand any more of this—I can't stand it!"

"My dear," Mrs. Strickland said, and went to sit beside her.

"Strickland, take the binoculars again, will you? Look at the keep. Got it? What strikes you about it?"

"Chiefly, all the scaffolding round it, I'd say."

"Windows?"

"There are narrow windows all the way up—lighting a spiral staircase, I seem to remember."

"Glazed?"

"No—no panes of glass at all."

"Imagine a skilled archer above ground level on the near side of the bailey. Could he shoot an arrow *through* one of those open windows?"

"I suppose he could. First shot, if he was a first-class archer."

"And on a flight that would pass *directly over the well?*"

"Certainly."

"That was what happened. That was the bow shot I heard and Frape heard—the *twang*. The arrow carried with it a line—by means of which somebody waiting in the keep could draw a strong nylon cord across the bailey, a little more than head high above the well."

Appleby turned to Robert. "You had already killed Jolly—simply with an arrow used as a dagger, I think. He was a meagre little man. You carried the body to the well—

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the single line of heavy footprints in the snow was yours; you pitched the body in, mounted the lip—*and returned across the bailey, hand over hand, on the strong nylon cord.* For an experienced mountain climber it wasn't a difficult feat at all.

"Then the nylon cord was released at the other end, swung like a skipping rope until it fell near one of the flanking walls, and pulled gently, very gently, back across the snow. There will be virtually no trace of its passage. It only remained to return the bow to the ascham here—the bow and one arrow. The second missing arrow is—in Jolly."

"You know too much." Robert Darien-Gore had been sitting hunched in a chair, his right hand deep in the pocket of his shooting jacket. Now he sprang to his feet, brought out his hand, and hurled something in the direction of Appleby—something which flew past him and into the fireplace.

Then the hand went back again and came out holding something else. The crack of a pistol shot reverberated in the gallery as Robert crashed to the floor.

"By God, he's dead!" Like a flash, Jasper had been on his knees beside his brother. But now he rose, dazed and staggering—and with the pistol in his hands. He came slowly over to Appleby.

"I think," he said, "my brother is—dead. Will you—see?"

Appleby took a couple of steps forward—and as he did so Jasper dived behind him. What Robert had hurled into the fireplace was Jolly's pocketbook; it had missed the fire, and lay undamaged.

Jasper grabbed it just as Appleby turned, and started to thrust it into the heart of the flame. Appleby knocked his arm up, and the pocketbook went flying across the gallery. Jasper eluded Appleby's grasp, vaulted a settee with the effortlessness of a young athlete in training, retrieved the pocketbook, and turned round to face the company. He still had Robert's pistol in his hand.

"Don't move," he said. "Don't any of you move."

"This is foolish," Appleby said quietly. "Foolish and useless. Your brother is indeed dead. And his last day's work has been to involve you in murder. You knew nothing about Jolly when he arrived—except that you distrusted him. But Robert made you receive him as a guest, and by dinnertime Robert had persuaded you to join him in his plot.

"Your own first part in it was to concoct that legend about the well. But your main part was to be in the keep when the arrow arrived, and later, when Robert had returned by the cord without leaving return footprints, to release the line. You now face a charge of murder, just as your brother would have faced one. Nothing is to be gained by waving that pistol."

"All of you get back from that fire—now." With pistol raised, Jas-

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per took a step toward Appleby. In his other hand he raised the pocketbook. "What I hold here, I burn—and no one will stop me. After that, we can talk."

"I'm sorry, Darien-Gore, but it won't do. Before you burn those papers, you'll have to shoot a policeman in the performance of his duty. And if—"

"Permit me, sir." Frape had stepped forward. He walked past Appleby and advanced on his employer. "It will be best, sir, that you give me the gun."

"Stand back, Frape, or I shoot!"

"As Sir John says, sir, it won't do. So, with great respect, I must insist."

And Frape put out a steady arm and took the pistol from his employer's hand. "Thank you, sir. I am obliged to you."

For a fraction of a second Jasper looked merely bewildered. Then, as Appleby again advanced on him, he turned and ran from the gallery.

"Frape, help me get him!" Instinctively, Appleby addressed first the man who had proved himself in a crisis. He was already running down the gallery as he called over his shoulder. "Strickland, Trevor—he must be stopped!"

The chase through Gore Castle took place in the first light of a bleak winter dawn. Judith Appleby, who had followed the men, was to remember it as a confusion of running and shouting, with ill-identified figures vanishing down vistas that were composed sometimes of stately rooms in unending sequence, sometimes of narrow defiles through forbidding medieval masonry.

It was the kind of pursuit that may happen in nightmare: in one instant hopelessly at fault, and in the next an all but triumphant breathing down the hunted man's neck.

Then they were in the open, plunging and kicking through snow. Suddenly, in front of Jasper as he rounded a corner, there seemed to be only a high blank wall. But he ran straight at it; a buttress appeared; in the angle of this stood a ladder, steeply pitched.

Appleby and Frape were at its foot seconds after Jasper's heels had vanished upward; but even as they were about to mount it, the ladder came down past their heads. As they struggled to set it up again, Judith could see that Jasper, with a brief respite won, was crouched down on a narrow ledge and fumbling in a pocket.

With trembling hands Jasper produced a box of matches—and then Jolly's fatal pocketbook. From this he pulled out a sheet of paper, crumpled it, and struck a match. But the match—and then a second and a third—went out.

By now the ladder was in place again. There was no time for another attempt at burning the paper. Clutching the pocketbook, Jasper rose and ran on. He vanished

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through a low archway, and reached the keep.

It was almost dark inside. Judith was now abreast of her husband. As they paused to accustom themselves to the gloom, Jasper's voice came from the tower above.

"Are you there, Appleby? I don't advise the climb."

"Darien-Gore, come down—in the name of the law!"

"This is my keep, Appleby. It was to defy the law—didn't I tell you?—that my ancestors built it long ago."

The last words were almost inaudible, for Jasper was climbing again. They followed. Perpendicular slits of light spiraled downward and past them as they panted up the winding stair.

Then, quite suddenly, there was open sky in front of them, and against it they saw Jasper's figure in silhouette. In front of him was a crisscross of scaffolding. One aspect of it they had already seen from other angles—a wooden plank, thrusting out into vacancy for some feet, and startingly suggestive of a springboard. Beyond it the eye could only travel dizzily down—to the inner bailey, the well, the single set of prints across the snow.

Jasper turned for a moment. They could see his features dimly, and then—very clearly—that he was holding up the pocketbook to them in a gesture of defiance. He thrust it into his pocket, turned away, measured his distance, and ran. It was not a jump; it was the sort of dive that earns a high score in a swimming meet.

In a beautiful curve Jasper Darien-Gore rose, pivoted in air, plunged, diminished in free fall, and vanished —as they ceased being able to look —into the well.

And from behind them came the breathless voice of General Strickland.

"Good God, Appleby! Jasper didn't better that one when he won a gold medal for England in the '36 Olympics."

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NEWEST spy story by
EDWARD D. HOCH

Here is the sixth in the new spy series featuring Rand, the Double-C Man . . . This time Rand tackles a particularly delicate problem—a spy on the inside, in top-secret headquarters itself. How did certain daily reports vanish as if by magic?

THE SPY WHO WALKED THROUGH WALLS

by EDWARD D. HOCH

RAND HAD BEEN AWAY FROM HIS office for more than a week, working with a Swedish chemist in a sterile jungle of test tubes and retorts. They'd been faced with an intricate chemical problem for the Department of Concealed Communications—how to develop a new type of photographic film being used by Russian agents in England and Western Europe.

"Any luck?" Hastings asked him on the first morning back.

Rand flipped quickly through the stack of routine mail on his desk. "Our chemist finally cracked it," he answered. "Those Russians are getting damned clever. Never went to so much trouble to develop a roll of film."

"Is it over, then? Are you ready for something else?"

"So soon? I haven't even written my report on this one."

Hastings hesitated. "Frankly, Rand, this is an inside matter. Something curious. It may be nothing or—"

"Or?"

"It may mean we have a spy in this building."

"That's happened before. Isn't it a job for Internal Security rather than Double-C?"

"There's a communication of sorts involved. And it certainly is being concealed. You know Nurse Beaver, don't you?"

Rand nodded. Everyone knew Nurse Beaver, a sprightly blonde girl who was always talking about the movies she'd seen with her boy friend. On many a bleak morning she'd been the single spark of youth and charm in the entire graybrowed building. "What's her problem? Somebody spying on her at the cinema?"

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"It could be more serious than that," Hastings ventured. "Some copies of reports have been disappearing from her desk. Want to come down and talk with her?"

Rand's gaze returned to the pile of unopened mail. "Can't one of my people handle it?"

Hastings cleared his throat. "Frankly, Rand—"

"You're having a difficult time completing your sentences this morning, sir."

"Frankly, Rand, if this does develop into something, then everybody in the building—in all departments—is suspect. That includes the people in Double-C. You were away all last week on that photographic thing, so you're the only one who couldn't possibly have been involved in what's happening."

Rand smiled sardonically, wondering if the man was joking. "Thank you for the vote of confidence, sir."

"You understand how it is."

Rand walked to the window and stared out at the Thames, all but hidden in the mists of an autumn morning. A pair of bobbies on bicycles went by in the street, heading in the direction of the fog-shrouded Big Ben. Nothing seemed quite right with the world.

"No, I don't understand how it is at all," Rand told Hastings. "But I think I'd better find out. Let's go see Nurse Beaver."

Nurse Beaver gave a toss of her blonde hair and said, "I just can't understand it. I can't understand why anybody would want them, and I can't understand how anybody could have taken them."

"Suppose you fill me in," Rand said, pacing the length of the narrow office that was Nurse Beaver's domain. Hastings sat silently in a chair. He might have been sleeping.

"Well, you know how things are down here, Mr. Rand. Sometimes I tape a cut finger or pass out cold capsules, but mostly I'm giving the shots. Anywhere from one to three dozen injections each day."

"For foreign service," Hastings explained, though Rand already knew it. He'd visited Nurse Beaver himself prior to a recent assignment in Southeast Asia. "Injections must be given for immunization against tetanus, smallpox, typhoid fever, yellow fever, cholera, and heaven knows what else. Correct, Nurse Beaver?"

"Quite correct, sir. The man's destination determines which series of shots he receives."

"Now tell Rand about your records," Hastings urged.

"Well, first thing each morning I type up a list of the shots I've administered the previous day. Like this." She held up a single sheet of paper. "I list names and Department numbers, together with a code designation for each destination, and then my own abbreviations for the exact shots administered. I prepare an original and two carbon copies

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daily, and place the original in a sealed dispatch envelope for hand delivery to the Operations Center. The two carbons are placed in my file basket on the desk for later filing."

"Why two carbons?" Rand asked, his interest beginning to stir.

"Regulations. In this building, we don't question them."

"Just what is your problem with these reports?"

"Well," she replied, enjoying her moment of importance, "I noticed one day last week that the second carbon had disappeared from my file basket. I didn't think too much about it at first, but the same thing happened the following day and the day after that! I went back, checked the file, and discovered that one copy of the daily report was missing for the past several weeks."

"The file is locked at night, of course."

"Certainly. But I don't pay that much attention when I'm filing. It didn't register on me till just last week that I was only putting away one carbon instead of two."

"So you think someone is stealing this daily shot report?"

"That's it," Hastings said, stirring in his chair. "Seems harmless enough on the surface, but consider the full import. For all practical purposes they form an exact listing of foreign assignments for every agent in the half dozen different intelligence units operating from this building."

"Oh, come now!" Rand objected. "You can't mean that agents leaving on top-secret assignments in enemy countries come to Nurse Beaver for their shots first!"

"Of course not. Other arrangements are made on top-secret assignments. These are mainly routine assignments to friendly countries—intelligence men on regular embassy staffs, like the American C.I.A. agents. Still, someone with those lists could know each day just who is going where. They could know the names of our men in each country, and in some cases the information could be used to greatly embarrass us."

Rand picked up the report and studied it more closely. "The destinations are coded."

"That code is an open office secret. Everyone in the building knows it, including yourself."

"Heavy traffic to 5466 these days," Rand mused. "Where's that again?"

"Cairo," Hastings told him quietly. "You can see how delicate this information is."

Rand turned his eyes toward the blonde girl. "Now, Nurse Beaver, suppose you tell us just who could be taking these reports from your desk."

"That's just it!" she said, throwing up her hands. "Nobody could have taken them! Nobody comes in here every day on a regular pattern. The patients are always different."

"You leave the office often?"

"I always lock the door when

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I leave. And anyone using a duplicate key would surely be noticed by the typists outside. I'm never away for more than a few minutes—just down to the rest room."

"What about lunch?"

"Sometimes I eat in. If I go out, I lock up. Besides, I always do my filing before lunch. The copy of the report must be taken sometime between nine o'clock and noon."

"And no one comes in, you say?"

"No one regular."

Rand crinkled the onion skin paper between his fingers, studying the names and numbers. Nurse Beaver wasn't the smartest girl in the building; perhaps she'd only misplaced the reports.

"What do you think?" Hastings asked.

"I don't know. If the reports really are being stolen, we need to set a trap of some sort. The human mind is an odd thing, Nurse Beaver. Something that happens every day is often so taken for granted that it goes unnoticed. There is, of course, someone who enters this office—and every other office—each morning regular."

"Who?"

Rand smiled slightly. "If I may borrow Chesterton's invisible postman for a moment—"

"The mail clerk!" Hastings exclaimed.

Rand nodded. "You told us, Nurse Beaver, that the original copy of the daily report is sealed in a dispatch envelope for hand delivery to the Operations Center. And who delivers it each day? The same clerk who brings us our morning mail. He comes every morning—even if you no longer notice him."

"Are you saying that he—"

"I'm saying nothing. Not yet."

Nurse Beaver's door opened, admitting the slender, dapper figure of Harvey Maxim, chief supply officer. "Well! Don't tell me you two are here for overseas shots!"

"Hardly," Hastings replied.

"Need anything today, Sally?" Maxim asked Nurse Beaver. Until that moment Rand hadn't considered what her first name might be.

"I'll check the stock. I may need some needles."

While she rummaged through the metal cabinets at the end of the narrow office, Rand had a thought. "Harvey, do we have a Geiger counter in the building?"

"No, but I could get one quickly enough. What's up?"

"We'll explain later. See if you can get a Geiger counter and some sort of radioactive marking spray. By tomorrow, if possible."

"Sure. How about the needles, Sally?"

"I have part of a box, Harvey. Enough for today."

Maxim left them, and Hastings asked, "What time does your mail usually come, Nurse Beaver?" Rand noticed with a silent smile that he didn't join in the use of her first name.

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"Any minute now," she said, consulting the wall clock.

"We'd better go, then. Phone us at Rand's office."

The mail clerk's name was James Rutger, and everybody called him Jim. He was a young fellow, still in his early twenties, with a habit of stopping to chat with the prettier girls in each Department. Rutger had sandy hair and a deep dimple in his chin. His uncle, a Member of Parliament, had helped him land the job in the top-secret building on the banks of the Thames. Jim Rutger was a most unlikely candidate for a spy.

Nurse Beaver phoned them shortly before noon. "I watched Jim every minute he was in the office," she whispered breathlessly. "He didn't touch the report. Nobody did. Both carbons are still here."

"Good," Rand said. "Keep in touch."

When he'd hung up, Hastings asked, "What do you think?"

"She watched Jim like a hawk, so naturally he did nothing."

"You think he's taking them?"

Rand sighed. "I think Nurse Beaver is a cute girl whose imagination is better than her filing system. But let's see what happens."

Rand turned his attention once more to the pile of mail.

The following morning, just before noon, Nurse Beaver phoned Rand's office. "Sir, it's happened again!"

"Settle down now, and tell me about it."

"There's nothing to tell. One carbon of the report disappeared from my file basket, just like before."

"All right. Who was in your office this morning?"

"Nobody. Jim with the mail, and six people for their shots."

"Make a list of them, will you? I'll be down to get it."

He hung up and dialed the supply room. "Maxim? Rand here. Locate that Geiger counter for us yet?"

"I've got it here."

"Good. We'll be needing it."

Rand then dialed Hastings' extension and heard the tired voice answer. "It's happened again, sir. Nurse Beaver's report."

"Damn! What now, Rand?"

The Double-C man hesitated only an instant. Sally Beaver had a life beyond these walls—a life and a boy friend who took her to the cinema. "I want an immediate security check on Nurse Beaver," he said.

Rand found her with a tall young career man named David Black, who sat poised for instant flight as he watched her unwrap a fresh box of needles and select one with gentle care.

"Is that thing going into me?" he asked.

"Now, now," Nurse Beaver soothed. "You get only the smallpox shot, and that's not bad at all."

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"Shipping out, Dave?" Rand asked casually.

"Just routine courier service."

Nurse Beaver did her job with quick efficiency. "Now what is your destination again, Mr. Black? For my records."

"Code number 5213."

"Thank you." She gave him another smile as he went out.

"Do you have that list for me?" Rand asked, seating himself on one of the plain wooden chairs lining the wall.

"Right here." She began reading from a sheet of paper. "There was Jim with the mail, and Dave Black—"

"He was in just now."

"He was here earlier, too."

"Oh." Rand made a note.

She read off five other names. "All for shots. They're shipping out."

"No one else?"

"No one."

Rand glanced under the desk. "Who empties your waste basket?"

She looked startled. "Well, of course *he* comes in every morning. I don't count him."

"Of course not," Rand said. "Thank you, Nurse Beaver."

Rand made his way to the basement, a great dark cavern of a place into which he rarely ventured. There, among locked and dusty files, he found Ben Cally, the man who emptied waste baskets. Ben was a World War II veteran who'd been with the French underground until a Nazi bullet grazed his brain and put him out of action. He wasn't good for much any more, only for emptying waste baskets of the innocuous memos and scrap paper that didn't rate the specialized treatment of the shredding machines.

"Hello, Ben, how are you feeling?"

Old Cally turned from his task of bundling newspapers and nodded a gray-specked head. "Mr. Rand! You don't get down here often."

"I came to see you, Ben. You emptied Nurse Beaver's waste basket this morning?"

"Every morning. She locks the place at night, so I have to do it in the morning. A lot of offices are locked at night."

"She might have lost something," Rand said, starting to rummage through the baler. "You never take papers from her desk, do you, Ben?"

"Gosh, no, Mr. Rand. I wouldn't do anything like that."

"Of course not." It was useless to look further down here.

As Rand turned to start upstairs, a black shape loomed in the doorway, unbroken by any hint of light. Rand's heart skipped a beat, but it was only Harvey Maxim, his coat off and his shirt sleeves rolled up, carrying a box of supplies. "Do you want to talk about the Geiger counter now?" he asked.

Rand glanced back at old Cally, busy with his treasured scraps. The man didn't seem to be listening.

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"Not here. Upstairs, in your office."

They climbed the stairs together. "Be ready in the morning," Rand told him. "First thing in the morning."

The report on Nurse Beaver yielded little. Her first name was indeed Sally, and she lived with her widowed mother in a London suburb. She was 24 years old, with only one regular boy friend—a dubious dockworker named Ralston. There was no evidence in the report that Ralston was a Communist or fellow-traveler, but he was known to frequent some of the dockside pubs where such people could be found.

Like so many government documents, the security report was inconclusive.

Rand tossed it down and reached for one of his American cigarettes. In the morning he would be ready.

The vast building was very quiet during the hours of dawn. On Rand's floor, only the message center operated 24 hours a day, and its clattering teletypes and decoding machines were safely screened behind soundproof walls.

Standing in the silence, Rand could only stare down at the dawn mists slowly lifting from the great river. It would be a sunny day in London for a change.

He was at Nurse Beaver's door when she unlocked it, watching while she washed her hands at the corner sink and went about her daily preparations. "You can watch me type the daily report if you'd like," she volunteered.

He stood by while she typed the original and two carbon copies, then saw her seal the original in a standard dispatch envelope. Hastings and Maxim arrived, and the dapper supply man set quickly to work at the task Rand had assigned him.

"Slightly radioactive," he explained to Rand as he sprayed the two carbon copies with a specially prepared solution. "Enough to register on this Geiger counter."

Rand watched while Maxim passed the device over the sprayed papers, listening to the familiar clicking that signaled the presence of radioactivity. "That should do it," he told Maxim.

"The original, too?" the supply man asked.

"No, she's already put it in the mail. I don't want to stop Jim Rutgers unless we're sure he's the one."

Hastings sipped a cup of Nurse Beaver's tea while Maxim turned his back to place the two copies carefully in the file tray. "Now what, Rand?"

"We'll place the Geiger counter on the desk just outside this office. No one can enter or leave without registering radioactivity. Ready, Hastings?"

The older man finished his tea. "With all these preparations we've probably scared him away."

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"Not if it's Jim," Rand observed. "He's still in the mail room at this time of the morning."

Hastings bit his upper lip thoughtfully. "If the sheets are radioactive, they can't be photographed, either, can they?"

Maxim shook his head. "The radioactivity isn't strong enough to fog the film. Look." He held up his wrist watch with a luminous dial and the Geiger counter cackled into sudden life. "People take pictures of wrist watches all the time without fogging their film."

"It was a good thought, anyway. What do you say, Rand? Wouldn't that be a great method of preventing the secret photography of classified documents?"

"It has possibilities," Rand answered absently. "But at times a camera isn't necessary. I had a case once where the enemy agent was a man with a photographic memory. He could have looked at something like Nurse Beaver's report and—"

"The mail should be here in about fifteen minutes," Nurse Beaver warned, and the three men prepared to leave. Harvey Maxim passed the Geiger counter over the file basket one last time to make certain everything was in readiness and the instant clacking reassured them. Then they left the girl alone and set up their equipment outside her office door.

Rand had arranged to use one of the typists' desks for their purpose, and he spread out some papers to give the impression of a meeting in progress. The Geiger counter was pointed casually at the nurse's doorway a few feet away. Girls moved about them at the other desks, chattering and typing in the general confusion of any busy office.

The first visitor to Nurse Beaver's office was David Black, who'd had his smallpox shot the previous day. He poked his head in the door, joked a bit with Nurse Beaver, and left after a few minutes. The Geiger counter was silent.

At ten minutes after ten young Jim Rutgers came by with the stainless steel mail cart they all knew so well. He left the cart by their desk and entered the office with a slender sheaf of morning mail. When he came out he carried the sealed dispatch envelope for the Operations Center.

The Geiger counter was still silent.

A few minutes later old Cally came to empty the waste baskets. He chatted with Nurse Beaver for a few minutes, but when he left the Geiger counter was still silent.

After that no one came. They could see a small portion of the office through the glass-paned door, and occasionally Nurse Beaver glanced out at them nervously. They were waiting for something to happen.

Finally Rand asked, "What's the time, Maxim?"

"Damn it, my watch has stopped." He glanced at the wall

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clock. "Almost eleven. Why?"

"I think it's time we—"

Then Nurse Beaver was at the door, her face white with disbelief. It was the face of a child, pleading for help.

"It's gone," she said simply. "Just like the others."

They went over the nurse's entire office with the Geiger counter—file tray, file drawers, waste basket, supply cabinet, desk. They went over Nurse Beaver from head to toe, and then they turned the Geiger counter on themselves. They checked the desk outside, and even all the typists in the area.

Nothing. Not a clue.

Yet only one of the two carbon copies remained in the file basket on Nurse Beaver's desk.

"It couldn't have happened," Harvey Maxim insisted, his voice shaking. "It must have been a spy who could walk through walls. He surely didn't go out this door."

"Through walls," Rand mused. "Did somebody check the window?"

"Locked," Hastings confirmed. "And dusty. Not opened recently."

"Only three people were in the office both yesterday and today," Rand observed. "Cally, Jim Rutger, and Dave Black."

"No, there were three others," Hastings reminded him. "Nurse Beaver and me."

"You said three." Rand's eyes narrowed.

"And you," Hastings added.

"I'd forgotten myself," Rand admitted. Then he had a sudden thought. "Could one of them have been carrying a lead envelope of some sort? To shield the radioactivity?"

Maxim shook his head. "It would have been too bulky."

"So where does that leave us?" Hastings demanded.

"With a spy who can walk through walls," Rand said.

The tension of the mystery was there among them. An enemy was in their midst—an unseen enemy who came and went at will. Hastings was busy on the phone, giving urgent instructions to Internal Security. Others came to look and wonder. Finally, Maxim said, "I'm going to grab some lunch before you need me again."

"I'll go with you, if you don't mind," Rand suggested. "I want to ask you about something."

They left Hastings questioning Nurse Beaver for the dozenth time and went downstairs to Maxim's trim little sports car. "What's up?" he asked Rand as they pulled into the stream of midday traffic.

"You called Nurse Beaver by her first name. I was wondering if you know her well. I'm especially wondering about her boy friend—a dock worker named Ralston."

Harvey Maxim shrugged. "I saw her once in a pub with a fellow. Seemed a nice enough chap."

They swung by Duke Street where Maxim dropped off his watch

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at a jeweler's for repair, then they lunched at a nearby restaurant overlooking Grosvenor Square. "It's good to relax for a few minutes," Rand said.

Maxim sipped his drink. "You think there's really a Russian spy loose in the building?"

Rand stared out across the park, watching distant children playing beneath the trees. Somewhere in the back of his mind the last piece of the puzzle dropped into place. "I thought so at first," he said.

"At first? You mean—"

Rand leaned back in his chair, suddenly weary. "There is no spy. There never was a spy. Nurse Beaver simply misfiled the carbons of the reports."

"But *this morning*!" Maxim protested. "One of the carbons did disappear!"

"She realized her former mistakes and had to cover them up. So she stole that carbon herself this morning."

"But the Geiger counter! The carbon of the report never left her office."

"No."

"Yet it wasn't there when we looked for it."

"No," Rand agreed.

"Then what happened to it?"

Rand waved his napkin, like a magician performing one last trick before lunch. "Remember the sink in the corner of the office? She simply tore the report into small pieces and flushed them down the drain."

Harvey Maxim let out his breath. "I'll be damned!"

Rand beckoned to the waiter and ordered lunch. He felt at peace with the world.

Secret & Urgent
To: Hastings
Subject: Nurse Beaver Affair

I have now concluded my investigation of the disappearance of certain reports from Nurse Beaver's office. I find that the carbon copies in question, records of injections made by Nurse Beaver are indeed valuable to an enemy agent. They are being regularly stolen from her office and delivered to the enemy's courier system.

The enemy agent is Harvey Maxim, our chief supply officer.

It was obvious from the beginning that Nurse Beaver's testimony as to her daily visitors could not be relied upon. She had forgotten Jim Rutger with the mail, and Ben Cally who emptied the waste basket. It was reasonable to assume that she could have forgotten someone else as well. On our first visit to her office we were interrupted by a visit from Harvey Maxim, checking on her supplies. She told him she had *part of a box* of needles. *Enough for today.* This implied daily visits by Harvey Maxim.

When I visited her the following day, she was just opening a *new box* of needles—evidence that Maxim

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had visited her that morning, during the period when the report was stolen. Yet this morning when I listed those who had been in the office both days, he didn't admit to being there.

Could he have taken the carbon of the report during these daily visits? Yes, because we saw for ourselves how Nurse Beaver turned her back on him to check the supply cabinet—obviously a daily procedure. This also explains why the report was *not* stolen two days ago. She turned her back as usual, but we were present too, talking to him all the time.

And now this morning. Maxim was one of the few who knew of our plan with the Geiger counter, so he could prepare for it. After he sprayed the two carbon copies of the report, he turned his back to us for a moment, placing them in the file tray. It was then that he stole one copy. Later, when he waved the Geiger counter over the file tray, we heard the clicking—but only *one* copy of the report was there.

How did he remove the stolen report from the office? I remembered encountering him in the darkened basement yesterday, carrying a box of supplies. His coat was off and his shirt sleeves were rolled up, yet I saw nothing but his black silhouette. There was no glow from the radium dial of his wrist watch. Why? Because he wasn't wearing one yesterday. And when I asked him the time today, he said his watch had stopped.

We were waiting for the Geiger counter to click when it discovered the missing report, and it clicked only at Maxim's radium-faced wrist watch. Since spies do not and cannot walk through walls, the report had to be *inside* the watch case, in place of the works. While his back was turned to us, he folded one carbon small enough to fit inside the watch. The report was, you'll remember, on thin onion skin paper.

Maxim left the watch at a Duke Street jewelry shop to be repaired. Obviously, the shop is a drop-off station in the enemy's courier network. Maxim believes I am satisfied there is no spy in the building. While he is off guard, I suggest that immediate action be taken against the Duke Street shop. And against Harry Maxim.

(Signed) *Rand, Concealed Communications*

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A new name in our roster of contributors—Frank Sisk whose stories have appeared in Saturday Evening Post, Story, and American Mercury. Mr. Sisk's first story in EQMM is an unusual tale of bank robbery—and of an unusual detective who had unusual methods . . .

THE FACE IS FAMILIAR

by FRANK SISK

A CONCEALED CAMERA HAD TAKEN the pictures just before noon on the previous day. The speed was three frames per second. Consequently, the scene didn't exactly flow. The movements of the principal actor and the unwitting players around him were spasmodic.

The lighting wasn't ideal either. At that time of day the glare from the tall plate-glass windows bounced diffusions of shadow off the marble floor, placing persons and objects half in and half out of silhouette.

The action began the moment the bank teller, a young woman named Ivy Westra, finished reading the note that had been pushed across the counter by the holdup man. The message, printed on the back of the bank's blue deposit slip, was ominously terse: *Fill bag and see gun beside it. 5s ,10s, 20s.*

Fright had not interfered with Miss Westra's trained reflex: she had touched her toe to the floor button that actuated the camera.

Now gray images leaped on the white screen slightly out of focus. The projectionist made adjustments. In the foreground, observed from behind, loomed Miss Westra's head and part of her left shoulder, and over her shoulder could be seen the right half of the holdup man's face, but not too clearly. On the counter between them a shapeless blur moved convulsively.

"That's the bag," said Lieutenant Harrison's voice above the hum of the film in the darkened room.

"An airline bag," confirmed Miss Westra's voice from where she sat.

"These pictures are damn foggy," said Gilbert Cosgrove, the bank's first vice-president.

As if responding to the criticism, the next dozen frames grew somewhat sharper. Several fitful jerks of his head brought the holdup man into fair perspective. He was wearing a snapbrim hat pulled low over his eyes which were hidden by dark glasses. His face was a long oval with a scraggly mustache daubed in the middle. His slightly jutting chin bore the hint of a cleft.

"Stop it right there a second," said Lieutenant Harrison.

The projectionist obeyed.

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"Can you magnify that frame a bit?" Harrison asked.

"Oh, sure. May lose a little of the detail."

"Give it a try. Yeah, that's better." He leaned toward the man next to him. "See what I see, Ed?"

Detective Sergeant Edwin Pickett was peering at the screen with his one good eye. Nobody would have known it to judge from his deadpan face, but he was surprised at what he saw.

"You see it, Ed?" asked Harrison again.

"See what?"

"Something familiar. Take away the mustache—it looks like a fake anyway. And the dark glasses. Strictly a disguise. And what have we got? When I saw these pictures last night it hit me hard. This guy is no amateur. This guy is *known* to us. I was sure last night that I'd find his face on file without even trying."

"And you didn't find it?" Pickett asked flatly.

"No, I didn't. That's why I called you back on duty. If anybody can spot him, as I told the Chief, it's Ed Pickett. Even with one eye."

"Thanks, Harry. Very much." Pickett's voice didn't mean what it said.

"Well, who is this guy Ed? You got him pegged?"

"Afraid not."

"You mean he doesn't look familiar?"

"Not too. Maybe I don't see so good with one eye, Harry."

Harrison seemed to sense the rebuff. He addressed the projectionist. "Let 'er roll. Possibly the guy's way of walking or something will refreshen Sergeant Pickett's memory."

The next thirty seconds flickered with the hazy actions of Miss Westra as she filled the airline bag with packets of the specified currency. The holdup man remained watchfully motionless.

Gilbert Cosgrove said to the audience at large, "That's nineteen thousand two hundred and forty dollars. Cold cash."

"Ten thousand in new twenties," Harrison told Pickett. "A little luck. We got those serial numbers."

"We kept that fact out of the morning papers, I notice."

"For a change. Now watch this guy as he walks away, Ed. To me even his walk strikes a chord of memory. I don't know just what, but it's there."

Pickett watched the holdup man lift the bag from the counter and strut with seemingly mechanical steps across the marble floor. At this point another hidden camera, with a higher speed setting, picked him up and recorded his natural gait.

It was familiar to Pickett all right. Fascinated, he watched the man stride purposefully past a dozen preoccupied customers and under the clock at the wide-open glass doors. The time was clearly discernible: 11:52.

"Fifty people on the premises at

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the time," said Gilbert Cosgrove as the film ended and the lights came on, "but not a damn soul knew a heist was in progress. Except Miss Westra, that is."

"I rang the alarm as soon as he left, sir."

"Of course, of course, my girl. I must commend you for following instructions."

"A cool customer, this baby," said Harrison, leaning back in his folding chair. "A real pro. No waste motion." He smiled questioningly at Pickett. "You placed him yet, Ed?"

Pickett faced Harrison expressionlessly. A black patch blanked his right eye but the other was keen as an icepick. "Something may come to me later," he said. "Right now he doesn't shape."

"You're sure?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" snapped Pickett.

Harrison shrugged. Later he drove Pickett home and on the way he said, "Ed, I guess I wasn't the most considerate guy in the world, dragging you out of convalescence, so to speak."

"Forget it."

"Accept my apology, will you?"

"Accepted, Harry."

A moment of awkward silence spread between them, then Harrison said, "What's the doctor say about the eye?"

"Not much. Besides taking that other oath—Hippocratic—all doctors must take a vow to keep their mouths shut."

"I know what you mean. But the Review Board sits on the case next Friday, doesn't it?"

"Right."

"He's got to make a definite report then."

Pickett nodded glumly.

"We need you, if that's any consolation," Harrison said.

"I need the work," said Pickett.

At the curb in front of the rundown apartment house which Pickett called home, Harrison said, "If you get any second thoughts on that bank robber, give me a ring day or night, Ed."

"I may just do that, Harry. Thanks for the lift."

Pickett lingered in the apartment house lobby only long enough to check his mailbox. It held a single letter with the return address of his ex-wife's attorney. He didn't bother to open it. Alimony arrears was not a subject that interested him much today.

Walking the three blocks to Main, he boarded a downtown bus. At the Hotel Atlantic he got off and headed for the men's grill. Near the pinball machine, as was his post-luncheon custom, stood Jack Lavell. Pickett signaled the small man with a slight inclination of his head and continued on to a back booth.

Lavell followed in a few seconds, like a dog on a long leash. Sliding into the seat opposite Pickett, he tried not to look worried. He worked

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a toothpick from one side of his liver-lipped mouth to the other.

Pickett said quietly, "I see you sold a case locally, Jack."

"I don't hardly get you, Sarge," said Lavell.

"The Merchants Union Bank. Yesterday noon."

Lavell licked his fat lips. "Come to mention it, I seen it in the papers."

"You cased it and sold it," said Pickett.

"What makes you so sure, Sarge?"

"I know the guy who did the stickup. He's never been within five hundred miles of this city before. He had to buy the layout. So don't try to con me, Jack, or I'll run you in as an accessory before and after the fact."

"So what can I do now, Sarge?"

"Just tell me where he's resting."

"How would I know that?"

"Because I know the way you work—two bills in advance for the fill-in and five per cent of the take if the job's a success. You always know your customer's forwarding address, Jack."

"You never been dumb, Sarge."

"More than you can say, Jack. You were damn dumb to case a local joint and break our agreement. I may *have* to run you in."

"Astoria Motel," whispered Lavell. "Number sixteen."

Pickett got up. "You better get out of town for a couple of seasons, Jack."

"Yeah, I better." The small man remained seated. "Is the guy really your cousin, Sarge?"

Pickett's one good eye bore down. "That's a matter I'm trying to forget. You better forget it too."

Pickett took a cab to a roadside stand with a towering neon sign that proclaimed the sale of a million frankfurters a year. He bought one of this year's million and ate it slowly, lost in the steady customer turnover. When he finished, he wiped his fingers fastidiously on a paper napkin and then strolled across the highway to the Astoria Motel.

Room 16 was around the back and somewhat shielded from the traffic noise. A coppertoned Mustang stood in the parking stall.

Alfred always managed to maintain a sporty image, Pickett thought as he knocked twice on the door.

Silence answered. He could almost hear it holding its breath.

He knocked again, the shave-and-a-haircut theme.

"All right, weisenheimer," said a muffled voice. "Who is it?"

"A non-kissin' cousin," said Pickett. "Now unbolt."

What sounded like a giggle came through the door. "This a social call or official, Eddie?"

"Neither," Pickett said. "Strictly business."

"You sure?"

"What difference does it make," said Pickett. "You're going to unbolt one way or the other."

"I guess so, yeah." The lock

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clicked and the door opened. The man behind it held a snubnosed revolver somewhat tentatively at the hip.

"Put that thing away, Alfred," said Pickett. "Before you crease your pants." He strode to the center of the room with an all-inclusive glance in several directions. "Close that door and lock it."

Alfred obeyed.

Pickett checked the bathroom. "You seem to be alone."

"Until you came in, Eddie. How'd ya know I was here?"

"If you don't know the answer to that, kiddo, you're in the wrong business."

Alfred giggled. When he did this he temporarily lost the patina that subtly contributed to the resemblance between the two men. "What business? I sell hair tonic now, Eddie."

"Sure. And the barber's union makes you carry a rod. You should have remained in Ohio, Alfred. This state's not big enough for the two of us."

Alfred walked to the dresser and and picked up a bottle of Scotch. "Join me in a slug?"

Pickett nodded and sat in a chair.

As he poured, Alfred asked chattily, "What's the matter with your eye, cousin?"

"I'm losing it," said Pickett bitterly.

Alfred came forward with a water glass half full of Scotch. "What do you mean, losing it?"

"The sight. Glaucoma. Forget it." Pickett took the glass. "I still see too much out of the other eye."

"Too much? Don't sound like a cop talking."

"If I were here to talk like a cop," said Pickett evenly, "I would have you in cuffs by now." He swallowed the straight Scotch. "Get me some water, Alfred. And while you're at it get me about nineteen thousand and some odd dollars."

Alfred stopped short at the bathroom door. "You're losing something more than your eye, Eddie."

"Get that water," Pickett snapped. "And the dough."

Alfred jumped to it. When he reappeared his oval face was white and drawn. At certain angles he now bore a marked resemblance to Pickett. The big difference between them was the mouth—the detective's was always stern. Alfred held out a glass of water with a hand that trembled a bit.

"Now get that money," said Pickett.

"What money, Eddie?"

"The money you stole yesterday from the Merchants Union Bank."

Alfred took a nervous sip of his own drink. "Hell, man, I got no idea what you're talking about. I only checked in here last night after—"

"After a hard day on the road selling hair tonic." Pickett got slowly to his feet. "Listen, Alfred, and listen good. I saw a screen test of you a few hours ago at head-

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quarters. Dark glasses, fake mustache and all, and you came through real good. But I would have recognized you even if you had been wearing a fright wig and a nylon stocking."

Alfred sat down on the edge of the bed. "You haven't seen me in ten years, Eddie. And you spotted me that easy? And with only one eye." He gave a disconsolate giggle. "I must be slipping."

"You've been slipping since your first tour of reform school," said Pickett. "I won't say crime doesn't pay. At least, you're driving the latest model Mustang and I'm walking. But crime doesn't pay as a rule unless you have brains. And that's one thing you don't have, cousin Alfred."

"I cut a corner now and then," admitted Alfred.

"This time you cut a corner so deep that the whole damned building is about to fall in on you."

"Clue me."

"I'll clue you, you nitwit," said Pickett tartly. "First, more than half that bank money is useless to you. We got the serial numbers and we're circulating them. Second, the dumbest thing you could have done was to pull a job in this town where the family resemblance between us sticks out like a red light."

"I don't think we look so much alike, Eddie."

"Neither do I, thank God," said Pickett. "But certain traits are similar from certain angles at certain times. Consanguinity is a big word I've learned to hate today."

"What's it mean?"

"It means there's enough Pickett blood in each of us for a punk like Jack Lavell to notice. And you admitted it to him, didn't you?"

"Yeah. He sort of took me by surprise."

"And here's another surprise. My own Lieutenant, who never laid eyes on you before, saw that film featuring you as holdup star of the year and then was ready to swear he'd find you in our mug book. You look so damned *familiar* to him. That's what he keeps saying. Even the way you walk. Hell, if he'd seen you without the dark glasses and mustache, Alfred, he'd have *known* why you look so familiar."

Alfred grinned and finished his drink. "That's a real gas, ain't it?"

"Keep smiling, cousin. But get the money."

"So you're going to arrest your own kin?"

"Get the dough. This is the last time I tell you."

Alfred went to the dresser and picked up a key case, which he tossed to Pickett. "The trunk of the car."

A few minutes later the detective was back in the room with a canvas airline bag. Unzipping it, he tossed the packages of money one by one on the bed after flicking briefly through each sheaf. Then, looking satisfied, he returned the money to the bag and zipped it shut.

"Look in the closet, Alfred, and

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see if you've got one of those paper laundry bags."

Alfred complied. As he dolefully handed it to Pickett, he asked, "What you want it for?"

"For this." Pickett opened the big paper bag bearing the name of the Astoria Motel and slid the airline bag inside. "This canvas bag is famous in local crime circles today, Alfred. No sense tempting fate."

"I don't get it."

"I know you don't. But I tell you one thing you can get. *Get out of town.*" Pickett shoved the laundry bag under his right arm. "Pronto."

Alfred stared in disbelief. "You mean you ain't turning me in?"

"That's right, Alfred. You're getting smarter already."

Alfred blinked, then giggled. "So that's it, Eddie. That's what you're up to. You can't turn me in without the money, and you want to keep the money. Yeah."

"Get out of town and don't come back," said Pickett, opening the door.

"That's dirty pool, Eddie," said Alfred plaintively. "You could at least split it down the middle. It's my caper, I took the risks. I—"

Pickett slammed the door and walked away.

In the cab back to town he calmly examined the critical step he had just taken. He had been moving toward it a long time. As cops go, he had always been fairly honest. Oh, he had shaken down a bookie now and then, but only for peanuts. And what had it got him?

His wife had walked out of their marriage three years ago because Harrison, not he, had been promoted to Lieutenant. But even a Lieutenant's pay wouldn't have been enough to satisfy Betty. She'd cleaned him of all assets at the time and was now bleeding him dry through alimony.

It was the lack of money that was directly responsible for the condition of his left eye. If he'd gone to the specialist sooner, his sight might have been saved.

"Glaucoma can be corrected," he remembered Dr. Gavage saying. "If we catch it in time. You should have come to me six months ago."

"You mean it's too late now."

"I'm afraid so."

In four more days the Police Review Board would have the medical report on the table. The action that would be taken on the basis of fact was mandatory—disability retirement at one-third of his pay. Nice. He couldn't get along on full pay, and here he was faced with a wholly impossible prospect . . .

Two days later he had a plan for the future roughly mapped out. After the verdict of retirement he would take a long-deferred vacation. Cape Cod, he'd tell whoever was interested. Instead, he'd fly to Mexico City. There he'd set up a mail address to which he could post the "hot" twenties. Then he'd come

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home for a few weeks to close the apartment . . .

The ringing phone shattered his reverie.

It was Harrison. "Ed, we've got another movie. Taken about an hour ago at the Brookhaven Branch of the First National Bank and Trust."

"How do I fit in, Harry?"

"I thought you might be interested. From eyewitness accounts, the guy who held it up sounds like the same guy who pulled the job at Merchants Union on Monday."

Pickett thought a streak of profanity. "How much did he get?"

"They think fourteen-fifteen grand. They're still counting. The film will be developed in about thirty minutes. Like to see it?"

"Why not?"

"I'll send a cruiser around."

"Fine." Pickett broke the connection, then found the number of the Astoria Motel and dialed it. A woman's voice answered. "This is Detective Sergeant Pickett," he said. "We're trying to get in touch with the owner of a brown Mustang hardtop, latest model, with an Ohio license plate. I don't have the number but we have information that the owner may be at your place."

"I remember that sporty little car," the woman said. "Just a minute, sir. Oh, yes, that was L. A. Dibble of Toledo. But he checked out this morning."

"Thank you." He hung up. "That blasted double-crosser."

He was still seething when he took a seat an hour later in the police projection room. Present beside Harrison were the bank teller—a man this time—who had surrendered the money, the branch manager, and two detectives.

The projectionist turned off the lights and the first series of pictures appeared on the screen. The lighting was worse, if anything, than in the earlier takes at Merchants Union, and the film speed was on a par with it. Nevertheless, the holdup man jerked recognizably into the foreground wearing the same snapbrim hat, the same dark glasses, the same ragged mustache.

"A nervy cuss," said Harrison.

Pickett gritted his teeth.

"Did he say anything to you?" Harrison asked the teller.

"Not a word, sir. The note was all. And the gun."

"I know this guy, Ed," said Harrison, slapping his knee. "I know him. I *know* him. But who the hell is he?"

Pickett said nothing.

The holdup proceeded without fault. The zipper bag—a different airline this time—was being filled with the efficient speed which characterizes financial institutions. The other customers, shuttling shadowily in the background, were unaware of what was happening. Now the holdup man was moving toward the entrance with that mechanical-toy gait. This time no other camera took over to add natural motion to the

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scene. As a result, when the holdup man accidentally bumped into an incoming fat woman, the action acquired an exaggeratedly comic effect. The woman's face registered three degrees of surprise as her mouth opened in three ever-increasing phases. The holdup man, his right hand engaged with the airline bag, raised his left in three twitching stages trying to catch something that fell from his face.

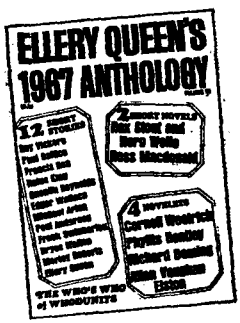
Pickett sensed Harrison leaning forward. "His phony glasses. He's dropped them, Ed."

Pickett's nerves tightened, but he kept himself outwardly relaxed. He watched the holdup man (the stinking two-bit gutless rat!) retrieve the dark glasses from the floor and, like a damn fool, turn to look in all directions before putting them back on his stupid ears.

Then the camera caught him full in the face for one fateful second. Just three frames on a film. But they were enough. They disclosed what the dark glasses had been hiding—a black patch over the right eye.

It hit Pickett hard, like an unexpected look at himself in a mirror after a long bad night. He watched Alfred again mask that despicably familiar face behind the dark glasses. He watched him leave the bank and become, for a moment, a stain against the bright glint of the sun in the doorway.

When the lights came on in the projection room, Pickett fought hard to suppress a desire to giggle.



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Down in Rio de Janeiro there's an "exile club," as they say. Johnny the Knock and Fig Lip and Millie from Milwaukee and Charlie One and Charlie Two and Preacher and Seldom Seen and the Indian—they were all members and they could hardly wait for Country Boy to get there and give them the lowdown—how Benny the Booze got to be Top Man of the outfit. And Country Boy was the boy who could tell them the straight dope . . .

TOP MAN

by JONATHAN CRAIG

I HADN'T BELIEVED IT THE FIRST TIME I heard it, and I still didn't believe it. But the boys kept saying it—that is, the boys up in the States kept saying it, and the boys down here in Rio kept repeating it—and I was beginning to wonder if there just might be something to it after all. A lot of wild things were happening in the States these days, and some of the old-timers were saying that it reminded them of the way it was back in Chicago when Big Al was going so good.

Capone was long before my time, of course; I'd come into the outfit after the machine-gun days and the one-way rides. In fact, I'd come in as a bookkeeper in a numbers shop. I'd had almost two years at Hanley Miller High School—which is why they call me the Scholar—and if I'd kept my nose a little cleaner I'd still be up there where the action is, instead of down here with the rest of the expatriates, as they say.

There are a lot of us here in Rio, you know, and very few of us by choice. Not that we don't like Brazil; it's just that of all the good things about it the best is that it's a long way from the cops and the courts in the good old United States. A thing like that can be very important to certain people. You might even say it can make the difference between life and death.

But about this business I started to talk about, these rumors and hints we'd been getting from the States. It didn't seem possible, but what the boys up there were saying was that Benny the Booze was now the Top Man.

And that didn't make any sense at all, because Benny the Booze was too hard in the muscle and too soft in the head, and he didn't have any more moxie and boss-man ability than a high-class ape. But still, that's what they were saying, in the phone calls between here and there. And what's more, they were saying it like Benny's becoming Top Man

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was the funniest thing that had happened in the outfit since Arson Eddie burned himself up instead of the warehouse he was supposed to put the torch to for Fader Jake. That's all we had to go on—the phone calls. Nobody in the outfit writes letters, of course, because the Feds have a way of reading them first.

So there were all those rumors and hints on the phone, with the boys in the States pretty much amused by it, but nobody down here knew any of the details and it was driving us all right out of our skulls. We all get together once a week, you see, in a private dining room at this hotel on Copacabana Beach, which we've pretty much made into an exile's club, as they say, and we maybe lift a few and cut up old times and try to keep up on what the boys in the States are doing these days.

But this thing about Benny the Booze now being Top Man of the outfit really had us going. The last any of us had heard, Tony Rock was Top Man, just liked he'd been for the last dozen or so years. They didn't come any tougher or smarter than Tony, and how a wet-brain like Benny the Booze could have taken over from Tony Rock was more than any of us could figure.

And then there were, like they say, the lieutenants, the guys next in line after Tony. Rough boys like Fat Felix and Angie Aces and Kay-Cee Matcher and Little Vincent. To be Top Man, Benny the Booze would have had to knock off not only Tony Rock but Fat Felix and the three others as well. But the boys in the States said it, and kept saying it: Benny the Booze was the Top Man.

So when we heard that Country Boy was going to be in Rio that Friday night, and that he was going to join us at our little weekly get-together at the hotel, we all made the scene, and we made it early. Country Boy was the first one to come in from the States since the rumors had started, and if anybody would know the real straight dope, he was the one. Like I say, we were all there: Johnny the Knock and Fig Lip and Millie from Milwaukee and Charley One and Charley Two and Preacher and Seldom Seen and the Indian and all the rest.

Country Boy was a little late getting there, and when he finally did show he looked like he might have stopped off at a few places along the way to see whether his elbow action was still in good working order. That meant he was taking a vacation, because when he's working, Country Boy doesn't drink at all. He's a real pro, one of the best hit men in the business—some say *the* best. He'd been a top torpedo before I was born, and a legend in his time, as they say. He wasn't really *in* the outfit, though; he was a free-lance, and always had been; but since he was such a good man, and a big favorite with Tony Rock, he worked mostly for the outfit.

He looked just like he had the

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first time I'd ever seen him, and I was pretty sure he was still wearing the same suit he'd been wearing then, and maybe even the same tie. He always wore old-fashioned double-breasted suits with wide stripes and wide lapels and flowery neckties about as wide as your hand with big splashy flowers on them. He had a long skinny face, and when he laughed he opened his mouth about as wide as it would go, without making a sound, so that every time he laughed half of his face disappeared.

He didn't look like much, but he was the best. And he never carried a gun. He was an icepick man, and an artist in every sense of the word.

He could stand in a crowded elevator, put his icepick just beneath the base of a mark's skull, and walk out at the next floor, with everybody thinking the guy had dropped dead of a heart attack. And he had a way of following marks into movie houses and taking the seat just behind them. When the action on the screen got interesting enough, he'd sort of lean forward a little, and even the people sitting on each side of the mark never suspected that he had suddenly lost all interest in the movie and everything else, permanently.

Like I say, Country Boy was a real artist, and it was no wonder he'd stood so high with Tony Rock, the Top Man—unless the rumors about Benny the Booze being the *new* Top Man were true after all.

Well, Country Boy must have been clued in by somebody that we were all pretty hot to know the score, but he just sat there at the guest of honor's place at the table, squinching up his little eyes behind those gold-rimmed cheaters of his and telling us all how good we looked and how nice it was to see us again. He had a lot of news for us, all right, and he didn't stop talking for a second. But not one word about Benny the Booze being the new Top Man.

He must have run on that way about half an hour, with everybody getting more irritated and frustrated every second, and some of the looks he was getting, especially from Millie from Milwaukee, would've knocked most guys right out of their chair.

Finally Millie from Milwaukee couldn't stand it any longer. She sort of eased herself about halfway up out of her chair—which wasn't easy for her, since she hits the Fairbanks at about 340—and gave Country Boy a hard focus and said, "All right, Country. You've got your kicks by now, so give with the news on Benny the Booze. Is he, or isn't he, the Top Man?"

Country Boy looked at her for a while, and then he took off his cheaters and wiped them on that big flowery tie of his, and put the specs back on and looked at her some more.

"It's a fact," he said, slow and

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solemn. "Benny the Booze is the Top Man."

Everybody around the table made some kind of noise—grunts and gasps and so on—to show they could hardly believe it. Hell, who *could* believe it?

"What happened to Tony Rock?" Charley One asked. "How come *he* isn't still the Top Man?"

"Good old Tony," Country Boy said, shaking his head sadly. "A wonderful guy. A sweet, wonderful guy. One of the grandest men I ever knew."

"Yeah, but what about Benny the Booze?" Charley Two said. "Talk it up, Country. What do you want to keep us hung up like this for?"

"It's a real sad story," Country Boy said. "There was even some violence connected with it. Quite a bit, in fact." He paused. "I guess you all know how much Benny the Booze *wanted* to be Top Man."

Everybody around the table made sounds to show they knew.

"Well," Country Boy said, "Benny figured there were five boys between him and the Top Man job—Kay-Cee Matcher, Little Vincent, Angie Aces, Fat Felix, and the Top Man himself, Tony Rock. So he looked around for somebody to help him eliminate them, so he could be Top Man himself."

"*All* of them?" Fig Lip asked, amazed.

"Every one," Country Boy said. "And he was lucky, because he was able to hire the best hit man in the business to help him out." He smiled modestly. "When I say the best hit man, I know I don't have to name any names for you to know who I mean. Right?"

We all made sounds to let him know we knew who the best hit man was.

"I *understand* the price for the entire contract was fifty G's," Country Boy said. "Cash in advance. People in a position to know tell me that's a record. But there were a couple of riders. First, all those boys had to be hit the same night. Second, Benny the Booze had to see for sure they'd been hit; he had to inspect them, one by one, as they arrived."

Country Boy paused, frowning. "And there was one more thing—something this hit man figured was beneath his dignity. And that thing was that Benny the Booze insisted the hit man dig a grave deep enough for all the boys, *and dig it himself.* You can imagine how the hit man felt about *that.*"

He looked around the table for the sympathy and understanding he knew was coming to him, and we all looked back at him the way we were supposed to. What a thing! Asking an artist like Country Boy to dig a hole in the ground!

"But as I was saying," Country Boy went on, "the price was right—it was a record contract for one night's work. And so this hit man did it. He dug a grave deep enough for all five of 'em. Oh, sure, he hated himself for it, but he did it. And

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then he made a few arrangements and supplied himself with a few choice icepicks from a collection of such items which he seems to keep, and got out his old battered last year's Cadillac and went to work. He was a man of his word. He'd made a contract with Benny the Booze to help Benny be Top Man, and that was exactly what he was going to do."

"All in one night?" the Indian asked, not doing too good a job of keeping the astonishment out of his voice. "All in *one night,* Country?"

Country Boy laughed that wide open-mouthed laugh that made half of his face disappear.

"Naturally," he said. "This hit man wasn't only the best, he was the fastest too. First he went calling on Kay-Cee Matcher. About an hour later there's old Kay-Cee, with no more problems, face down in the bottom of that fine new grave."

"And so where was Benny the Booze all this time?" Seldom Seen wanted to know.

"Parked behind some trees about fifty feet away," Country Boy said. "After this hit man heaved Kay-Cee in the grave, here came Benny on the double and shined a flashlight down in the hole to see for sure it's Kay-Cee, and then beat it back to his car again. Didn't say a word."

"All right for Kay-Cee," Millie from Milwaukee said. "Who was next?"

"This hit man was sort of working his way up the chain of command," Country Boy said. "He wasn't only good and fast but . . ." He broke off and looked down the table at me and raised an eyebrow questioningly.

"Methodical," I said.

"Right," Country Boy said, smiling. "Methodical. Thank you, Scholar."

I was pleased, of course. It was one of those little things that you can look back on in later life, after you're past 40.

"The next man up," Country Boy began, and then laughed. "Or maybe I'd better say the next man *down,* was Little Vincent. Right in the ground, no trouble at all. And Benny the Booze races back and forth with his flashlight, making sure this hit man isn't throwing in any ringers on him."

"And next?" Preacher asked.

"Angie Aces," Country Boy said. "Angie gave this hit man a little trouble. He was kind of hard to find, and even harder to get into the car; but it all worked out fine, and pretty soon Angie was down in there with the rest of them. And of course Benny the Booze makes his two-way sprint with his flashlight, just to make sure it's really Angie."

"That's three," Millie from Milwaukee counted.

"Number four was Fat Felix," Country Boy said. "And they never called that boy Fat Felix for nothing, believe me. Getting old Felix in that hole was more work than all the others put together."

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"And that left only the Top Man himself." Johnny the Knock said, awed. "Tony Rock."

Country Boy let out a long sigh. "Ah, yes," he said. "Tony Rock. One of the sweetest guys that ever lived."

There was a long silence all the way around the table. You know the kind of silence I mean; it's the kind that's loud enough to break your eardrums. I don't know how the others felt; me, I felt like I'd been hit with a sledge hammer. Tony Rock! The toughest, brainiest boy that had ever taken over the outfit. It left me feeling numb all over.

Country Boy sighed again. "But a contract is a contract, and I'm a man of my word, as is well known. Am I right?"

Some of us nodded, but nobody said anything. He was right. A contract is a contract, and when you make one you keep it.

"Anyhow," Country Boy said, "as soon as Fat Felix was in the hole, here comes Benny the Booze out of the trees again and shines his flashlight down on Felix's face and grunts and says, 'Four down and one to go, and then I'll be Top Man,' and then this hit man says, 'Right,' and puts his icepick into Benny where he figures it'll do the most good."

Nobody said anything; I don't think anybody *could* have.

Country Boy looked around the table. "Like I told you," he said, "this hit man had made a few arrangements before he started out—like calling Tony Rock for an okay on what he was going to do." He paused, and I could see that crazy silent laugh of his beginning to build itself up again.

"And so that's how Benny the Booze got to be Top Man," he said. "The last boy to go in that hole, right on top of all the other boys stacked up in it, was Benny. This hit man had told him he'd make him Top Man, and he had—Top Man in the grave."

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **HENRY SLESAR**

TITLE: ***The Cop Who Loved Flowers***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Captain Flammer

LOCALE: Haleyville, United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *To a detective all facts are important—you never know when even a smattering of knowledge can point to the truth, however deep it may be hidden . . .*

SPRING COMES RESOLUTELY, EVEN TO police stations, and once again Captain Don Flammer felt the familiar, pleasant twitching of his senses. Flammer loved the springtime—the green yielding of the earth, the flourishing trees, and most of all, the flowers. He liked being a country cop, and the petunia border around the Haleyville Police Headquarters was his own idea and special project.

But by the time June arrived, it was plain that there was something different about Captain Flammer this spring. Flammer wasn't himself. He frowned too much; he neglected the garden; he spent too much time indoors. His friends on the force were concerned, but not mystified. They knew Flammer's trouble: he was still thinking about Mrs. McVey.

It was love of flowers that had introduced them. Mrs. McVey and her husband had moved into the small two-story house on Arden Road, and the woman had waved a magic green wand over the scraggly garden she had inherited. Roses began to climb in wild profusion; massive pink hydrangea bloomed beside the porch; giant pansies, mums, peonies showed their faces; violets and bluebells crept among the rocks; and petunias, more velvety than the Captain's, invaded the terrace.

One day the Captain had stopped his car and walked red-faced to the

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fence where Mrs. McVey was training ivy. Flammer was a bachelor, in his forties, and not at ease with women. Mrs. McVey was a few years younger, a bit too thin for prettiness, but with a smile as warming as the sunshine.

"I just wanted to say," he told her heavily, "that you have the nicest garden in Haleyville." Then he frowned as if he had just arrested her, and stomped back to his car.

It wasn't the most auspicious beginning for a friendship, but it was a beginning. Flammer stopped his car in the McVey driveway at least one afternoon a week, and Mrs. McVey made it clear, with smiles, hot tea, and homemade cookies, that she welcomed his visits.

The first time he met Mr. McVey, he didn't like him. McVey was a sharp-featured man with a mouth that looked as if it were perpetually sucking a lemon. When Flammer spoke to him of flowers, the sour mouth twisted in contempt.

"Joe doesn't care for the garden," Mrs. McVey said. "But he knows how much it means to me, especially because he travels so much."

It wasn't a romance, of course. Everybody knew that—even the town gossips. Flammer was a cop, and cops were notoriously stolid. And Mrs. McVey wasn't pretty enough to fit the role.

So nobody in Haleyville gossiped, or giggled behind their backs. Mrs. McVey and the Captain met, week after week, right out in the open where the whole town could see them. But he was in love with her before the autumn came, and she was in love with him; yet they never talked about it.

She did talk about her husband. Little by little, learning to trust Flammer, inspired by her feelings for him, she told him about Joe.

"I'm worried because I think he's sick," she said. "Sick in a way no ordinary doctor can tell. There's such bitterness in him. He grew up expecting so much from life and he got so little."

"Not so little," Flammer said bluntly.

"He hates coming home from his trips. He never says that in so many words, but I know. He can't wait to be off again."

"Do you think he's—" Flammer blushed at the question forming in his own mind.

"I don't accuse him of anything," Mrs. McVey said. "I never ask him any questions, and he hates to be prodded. There are times when—well, I'm a little afraid of Joe."

Flammer looked from the porch at the pink hydrangea bush, still full-bloomed at summer's end, and thought about how much he would enjoy holding Mrs. McVey's earth-stained hand. Instead, he took a sip of her tea.

On September 19th Mrs. McVey was shot with a .32 revolver. The sound exploded in the night, and woke the neighbors on both sides of the McVey house.

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It was some time before the neighbors heard the feeble cries for help that followed the report of the gun, and called the Haleyville police. Captain Flammer never quite forgave the officer on duty that night for not calling him at home when the shooting occurred. He had to wait until morning to learn that Mrs. McVey was dead.

No one on the scene saw anything more in Captain Flammer's face than the concern of a conscientious policeman. He went about his job with all the necessary detachment. He questioned Mr. McVey and made no comment on his story.

"It was about two in the morning," McVey said. "Grace woke up and said she thought she heard a noise downstairs. She was always hearing noises, so I told her to go back to sleep. Only she didn't; she put on a kimono and went down to look for herself. She was right for a change—it was a burglar—and he must have got scared and shot her the minute he saw her . . . I came out when I heard the noise, and I saw him running away.

"What did he look like?"

"Like two feet running," Joe McVey said. "That was all I saw of him. But you can see what he was doing here."

Flammer looked around—at the living-room debris, the opened drawers, the scattered contents, the flagrant evidence of burglary, so easy to create, or fabricate.

The physical investigation went forward promptly. House and grounds were searched, without result—no meaningful fingerprints or footprints were found, no weapon turned up—indeed, they found no clue of any kind to the murderous burglar of Arden Road. Then they searched for answers to other questions: Was there really a burglar at all? Or had Joe McVey killed his wife?

Captain Flammer conducted his calm inquiry into the case, and nobody knew of his tightened throat, of the painful constriction in his heart, of the hot moisture that burned behind his eyes.

But when he was through, he had discovered nothing to change the verdict at the coroner's inquest: Death at the hands of person or persons unknown. He didn't agree with that verdict, but he lacked an iota of proof to change it. He knew who the Unknown Person was; he saw his hateful, sour-mouthed face in his dreams.

Joe McVey disposed of the two-story house less than a month after his wife's death—sold it at a bargain price to a couple with a grown daughter. Joe McVey then left Haleyville—went to Chicago, some said—and Captain Flammer no longer looked forward to spring, and the coming of the flowers, with joyful expectation.

But spring came again, resolutely as always, and despite the Captain's mood of sorrow and resentment at his own inadequacy, his senses be-

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gan to twitch. He began driving out into the countryside. And one day he stopped his car in front of the former McVey house.

The woman who stood on the porch, framed by clumps of blue hydrangea, lifted her arm and waved. If a heart can somersault, Flammer's did. He almost said Grace's name aloud, even after he realized that the woman was only a girl, plumpish, not yet twenty.

"Hello," she said, looking at the police car in the driveway. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Yes," Flammer said dully. "Are the Mitchells at home?"

"No, they're out. I'm their daughter Angela." She smiled uncertainly. "You're not here on anything official, I hope?"

"No," Flammer said.

"Of course, I know all about this house, about what happened here last year—the murder and everything." She lowered her voice. "You never caught that burglar, did you?"

"No, we never did."

"She must have been a very nice woman—Mrs. McVey, I mean. She certainly loved flowers, didn't she? I don't think I ever saw a garden as beautiful as this one."

"Yes," Captain Flammer said. "She loved flowers very much."

Sadly, he touched a blue blossom on the hydrangea bush, and started back toward his car. He found that his eyes were filling up, and yet they had seen things clearly.

For suddenly he stopped and said, "Blue?"

The young woman watched him quizzically.

"Blue," he said again, returning and staring at the flowering hydrangea bush. "It was pink last year—I know it was. And now it's blue."

"What are you talking about?"

"Hydrangea," Flammer said. "Do you know about hydrangea?"

"I don't know a thing about flowers. As long as they're pretty—"

"They're pretty when they're pink," Flammer said. "But when there's alum in the soil—or iron—they come up blue. Blue like this."

"But what's the difference?" the girl said. "Pink or blue, what difference? So there's iron in the soil—"

"Yes," Captain Flammer said. "There must be iron in the soil. And now, Miss Mitchell, I'll ask you to please fetch me a shovel."

She looked bewildered, but then she got him the shovel. There was no triumph on Flammer's face when he dug up the revolver at the base of the hydrangea bush, its barrel rusted, its trigger stiff.

He didn't rejoice even when the gun had been identified, as both the weapon that had killed Grace McVey and as the property of Joe McVey. He didn't rejoice when the killer had been brought back to face justice. But while he felt no sense of victory, Captain Flammer admitted one thing: there was a great deal of satisfaction to be derived from the love of flowers.

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MIRIAM ALLEN deFORD**
TITLE:	***At the Eleventh Hour***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*It was a matter of life and death. If they didn't believe him, the wrong man would be executed; but if they did believe him . . .*

THE YOUNG MAN WALKED SLOWLY in the sun, up the long cement path to the entrance. There the armed guard in the sentry box by the barred gate looked at him and said crisply, "Sorry—visiting hours are over."

"I want to see the warden," the young man said.

"Have you an appointment?"

"No. But it's a matter of life or death."

"You'll have to do better than that."

The young man fought the panic within him. The mere sight of the monstrous buildings had turned him cold.

"It's about—about a man they're going to execute tomorrow."

The guard glanced at him dubiously. Another crank, his eyes said. But he turned to his phone.

"The warden's secretary will see you," he said. He opened the gate and showed the visitor which way to go.

The warden's civilian secretary was brisk and wary.

"The warden's not here," he said, and whether it was true or not didn't matter. "He won't be back till late tonight. Tell me what you have in mind and I'll pass it on to him."

The young man hesitated.

"It's about Morgan Johnston," he said finally. "I have proof that he didn't do it. Absolute proof."

"New evidence, you mean?"

"I suppose so."

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The secretary pondered. Then he decided this wasn't an emergency. The warden always took a full day off at home before an execution—to brace himself for the ordeal.

"In that case," the secretary said, "you don't want to see the warden. You want to see Johnston's lawyer. He's the one who's moving heaven and earth to get a stay."

"Who is he?"

"You have vital information on the case, and you don't even know who his lawyer is?"

"I've been in Mexico," the young man explained. "I just found out yesterday that the appeal had been turned down, and they didn't mention the lawyer's name. The plane got here this morning. I've been out of touch."

"Well, it's Vernon Holliday. Know him?"

"No, but I can find him. How fast can I get back to the city?"

"There are no more buses today. You can phone here for a taxi." The secretary pondered again. The visitor looked tired and pale, but he seemed to be normal. If he really had something, there would be trouble if he was turned away without help. "I'll tell you what I'll do," he added. "I'll call Holliday for you and let you talk to him."

The lawyer's voice was raspy and he sounded even wearier than the young man himself. "Have you really got anything?" he snapped. He'd had dozens of crank calls.

"Yes," said the young man. "But I can't discuss it this way. When can I see you?"

"I'll wait in my office. Get here as soon as you can."

The tall thing young man and the bald stocky lawyer eyed each other across the desk.

"All right," Holliday said. "I've tried everything else. Every one of the Supreme Court Justices has refused to issue a holding order. The Federal judge here has turned down my petition for a stay of execution. They all ask if I have new evidence, and I haven't got any. Maybe miracles do happen. All you've said so far is that you have absolute proof Johnston isn't guilty. Spill it."

The young man's voice shook, but he stared into the lawyer's face.

"I know he didn't murder Ronald Garvey," he said. "For the best reason in the world. You see, I'm Ronald Garvey, and I'm alive."

Holliday glared at him disgustedly.

"You must be crazy," he said. "Johnston was found standing over the dead body of a man who had just been shot through the head. The body was autopsied, and the bullet came from the revolver Johnston was holding. *And* the body was identified, *and* it was that of Ronald Garvey. Are you wanted in some loony bin somewhere?"

The visitor flushed, but he kept his temper.

"I know all that," he said stead-

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ily. "But the body wasn't mine. It was my brother's. My brother Richard. And Johnston didn't kill him. I did."

In the sudden silence the scene repeated itself again in the young man's mind, just as it had done hundreds of times during the past year.

The shot, the instant fall, and Johnston grabbing the pistol from him. Then Johnston's grotesque words.

"Okay. Thanks, son. Now get the hell out here—quick. Wait, have you any identification on you?"

"Why, I guess so," he had stammered through his shock.

"Give it to me. We'll plant it on him. Then beat it before somebody in the front office gets here. Take the back door and go down the firestairs. Have you any money?"

"Not much. But why—I did it—"

"Shut up. You did it for me. I'll get off—my standing, my influence. I can say it was a holdup, or self-defense. Nobody knows you, or him either. Here—"

He pulled out his wallet and thrust a thick roll of bills into Ronald Garvey's pocket.

"Go somewhere, right away, as far as this will take you. Not back to your home town. Stay there till this thing's blown over and we're both safe. Wherever you go, take another name, and don't go where either of you was ever known. When you hear that it's over, write me and we'll make arrangements for the future."

"But I can't let you—"

"Damn it, *why* did you kill him? Do you think I want that to come out? I might as well have given in to him. For God's sake, get out of here—I hear somebody coming!"

He thrust the young man through the back door and closed it after him . . .

"Can you prove that?" Holliday demanded.

"It's the truth."

"You know what it would mean?"

"Of course. I'll be indicted instead. I'll plead guilty and I'll get either a death sentence or life imprisonment."

His composure broke down at last.

"Can't you understand?" he sobbed. "I killed my own brother! I never wanted Morgan Johnston to take the blame. He forced me to run and leave him with it. He knew why I did it, and he was grateful. And he was so sure he'd either never be held or, if he was, that he'd be acquitted."

"He might have been, at that," Holliday said meditatively, "if there hadn't been that big hullabaloo right then about only the poor and friendless ever being sentenced to death. Then his claim of self-defense broke down when it was found that you—that is, your brother was unarmed. And of course the

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fact that Johnston was running for office, with the primaries only a month away, and all his political enemies out gunning to stop him because his chances were so good. The prosecuting attorney was one of the bitterest; it was pure pie for him, manna from heaven.

"I tried to get a change of venue. I tried to get it reduced to murder two. But it was no go. Johnston wouldn't help me; I've been working blind all along. I still don't know what's behind all this, *why* any of it happened. All he would say was, 'I didn't know the man, he came to my office, he attacked me, and I shot him to save my life.'

"I did what I could. He wouldn't take the stand. I had no witnesses. I argued that in any event there was no premeditation; the prosecution got the office staff to testify that no, certainly not, he'd never had a gun right out in plain sight on his desk. And from that I got a ruling that taking the gun from a drawer or wherever he had it and using it to kill an unarmed man *was* premeditation: there's precedent for that—even ten seconds is enough. If he'd simply struck your brother with his fist and killed him, I could have put it over.

"Well, now at least I've got something to go on, and a few hours to work in. Give me the lowdown, and I'll get after the Federal judge again."

Garvey shook his head.

"That's just it," he said slowly, wiping his eyes. "That's the reason he made me leave. Naturally, he didn't dream it would come to this, but I'm sure he'd rather die tomorrow than have me tell the whole story. That's the way I feel, and I owe it to him to let him make the decision.

"With what I've told you—and I'm ready to swear to it before the Grand Jury and let them indict me—you ought to be able to get an immediate reprieve and then get him off. But unless he agrees, I won't tell a judge or jury any more about the background than he did."

"Are you crazy?"

"No—just trying to be honest and decent. I was a coward to let him hustle me off. I was more or less in a state of shock. And I thought he should have known he could trust me to take my medicine and say nothing, and I was hurt. But now I realize that was unfair. After all, I was a complete stranger; he'd never seen either of us before. How could he know I wasn't the same kind of slimy scum Ricky turned out to be?"

Vernon Holliday shook his head like a bull full of darts from the picador.

"*One* of us is crazy," he said, "and I don't think it's me. Even if you're hell-bent on taking Johnston's place, who's going to believe you, just on your say-so that you did it instead of him? If he won't tell me, or let you tell me, what have I got to work on? I can't even

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get a stay of execution on the mere assertion that somebody else insists he's the real murderer."

"I can prove I'm really Ronald Garvey, if that would do it. I can get witnesses from my home town who have known me for years, and some of them knew Ricky too."

"All that would mean would be a brief stay while they cleared up the confusion and changed the name of the victim. Johnston was convicted of murdering a man, and that man is dead, and a mistake in his name doesn't really matter. The only thing that could save Johnston would be *proof* that you were the murderer. But no judge on earth would convict you on nothing but your unproved confession."

"I'm willing," Garvey said stubbornly, "if *he* is. You're his lawyer; you can see him, right up to the last minute. I can't. Ask him."

"For God's sake, by this time the man's being moved down from Death Row to the cell next to the execution chamber! I suppose I could drive up there tonight, but I've got to secure some sort of stay before tomorrow morning."

He looked shrewdly at his visitor.

"Was your brother blackmailing Johnston?" he asked abruptly.

Garvey only tightened his lips.

"Give me your hotel address," said the lawyer, sighing, "and stay there till I get in touch with you. What name are you registered under—your brother's?"

"No, I couldn't use his—he had a record and he was on parole. I suppose they're still trying to find him for violation. I was Philip Ronald in Mexico and that's the way I checked in here; it's the name I use as a writer and I guess I'll have to keep it from now on—till I'm arrested, anyway."

Holliday ignored those last words. As soon as Garvey had left he phoned the warden, and had no difficulty in reaching him at his home. He told the story briefly and got permission to talk to Johnston in the waiting-cell. Five minutes later, after alerting his answering service, he was in his car and on the way to the State Prison.

Ronald Garvey lay, fully dressed except for shoes, on the bed in his hotel room with the lights on, filling the ashtray with cigarette butts. He was too nervous to sleep and he might have a visit from Holliday at any minute. He dared not take a drink, though he had a bottle handy, because he had to keep his mind alert. There was nothing to do but think.

Viola French. That was what had started it. His friend who worked on *The Daily Statesman* had let him use its "morgue" for material on an article he was writing about General Frémont. Rummaging through the envelopes, right back of Frémont he had come across one marked *Viola French.* For a moment the name seemed

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just vaguely familiar, and then, with a start, he knew.

He was only six when his mother died, but he had heard her say often enough that that had been her stage name. Ever since he could remember, he had listened to her laments that she had left the stage to marry Philip Garvey, and then he had died and left her with two babies to support and no money, and it was too late for her to go back on the stage.

He took out the envelope and opened it. In five minutes he knew more about his mother than he had ever guessed, including the fact that her death had been suicide.

Where he had made his mistake, in his first astonishment, was in deciding to find Ricky again and tell him about it. This time he had to get the address from a parole officer.

In their earliest days, in those six years in that horrible place, he and Ricky had been very close. Ricky was his little brother, whom he had to protect and defend. Then after they went to different foster homes he never saw him at all; in fact, it wasn't till they were both grown and out in the world that he had read about Ricky's trouble—the first trouble—and communicated with him.

He'd tried then to get them back on the old basis and set Ricky straight, but it was too late. Ronald was working all day in that sales job and taking college classes at night; he simply didn't have the time, and even if he had had, Ricky was already set in his disastrous ways. So they had drifted apart again.

"I'll be damned!" was all Ricky had said then. "Who'd have thought it?"

Of course, Ricky didn't remember her at all; he had been barely four when she took her overdose of sleeping pills and the two little boys had been hustled off to the orphanage.

He should have had better sense, Ronald now thought gloomily. At least he shouldn't have told Ricky anything more that he discovered. He should have realized the way Ricky's mind and temperament would react.

It was nearly three a.m. when there was a knock on his door and he heard Holliday's voice outside. The lawyer dropped into the nearest chair.

"I need a drink," he said. "I'm beat."

Garvey opened the Scotch and poured for him; he still left it untouched for himself. Holliday downed it at a gulp and held out his glass for more.

"Well," he said exhaustedly, "it's no go. I couldn't move Johnston an inch. He's made up his mind to go through with it. As he said, with his business shot and his political aspirations cooked, what would he do with himself anyway? And he

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insisted that you were lying to save him, and that he was the one who killed your brother."

"That's not true," Garvey muttered.

"He talked a little, but he still wouldn't give me an inkling of the real story. He gave me some instructions, though."

He fished in a pocket and came out with a folded sheet of paper.

"This is his holograph will—two guards witnessed it. It names me as executor and it leaves everything he has, after my fee and the other expenses, to you. Ostensibly it leaves it 'in trust or a person known to my said attorney'; he couldn't use your name, of course, but the understanding was that I was to pass it on to you. There's one proviso—you must agree to take no further steps, to drop the case forever."

"I don't want his money," Garvey said obstinately.

"Don't be a fool. He has no kin to claim it. The guy's willing to die to keep his secret. And he told me you were the only person in his entire life who had thought enough of him to risk his life in his defense. 'Even,' he said, 'if the actual killing had been his instead of mine, as you keep telling me it was.'"

"It was. And I don't want it. As a matter of fact, I was more concerned about keeping my brother out of trouble than about protecting Johnston, so he has no cause to feel grateful to me—no cause at all."

"Well, there's one more thing, and that might change your mind. He says that if you'll appoint me your legal representative, so that anything said between us will be confidential information between lawyer and client, you may tell me the whole story—but not till after he's dead."

Garvey stared at him. There was a lump in his throat.

"Okay," he said, choking a little. "Under that condition I'll do whatever he wants. When—when does it happen?"

"It's scheduled for ten o'clock—about seven hours from now. Suppose you check out of here and come over to my place? I live alone. We can wait there for the local newscast, and perhaps we can get some sleep first."

"I couldn't sleep, but all right. I've got only one bag to pack."

"Oh, I almost forgot," said Holliday. "He did tell me one thing we'd wondered about—why he put your identification on your brother's body."

"I've guessed that, more or less, but tell me anyway."

"Johnston acknowledged that your brother was blackmailing him. That was pretty obvious. But did you know your brother was signing the letters he sent Johnston with your name instead of his own?"

"I was afraid of that."

Ronald Garvey felt sick. He tried to think of the brother he had

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loved, and all he could feel was pain.

"Johnston had kept the letters; they were in an envelope in a locked drawer of his desk. After the shooting he had no time to get them out and destroy them. The only way to keep them from finding you and prosecuting you for extortion, he thought, would be to make it appear that you were dead.

"But I found out that the letters *were* destroyed; he had an old maid secretary who was devoted to him. She had the keys and she went through his desk before the police got there. When she found the envelope marked *Burn unread if found,* she took it upon herself to obey orders. She told me about it, long ago, but I had no idea what was in the envelope.

"One thing I still don't understand. How did it happen that neither she nor anyone else in the office saw that there were two visitors to Johnston that morning, not one?"

"I can explain that. When I discovered what my brother was up to and followed him to try to stop him, I flew here and arrived ahead of Ricky, who was driving—in stolen cars, incidentally. I contacted Johnston at his home, not his office, early in the morning, and told him what I knew.

"He took me with him into his private office before anyone else got there. I was there with him when Ricky arrived and asked for him and was told to go in. The idea was that I would confront Ricky and stop the whole thing. Only it didn't work out that way. He was taken aback, but he recovered and began to curse me. He threatened that if I interfered he'd see that I was the one who paid for it. I know now what he meant—he had signed the letters as me.

"When I left home I took my revolver along. I'd got it years ago, when I had a job collecting money in a rough neighborhood. The permit had expired, but I kept the gun anyway. I had no intention of using it, but I thought it might come in handy to scare Ricky.

"I pulled it out and he made a dive for it. I threw my arm back to keep it from him, and it went off and shot Ricky."

He stopped, unable to go on.

Holliday looked puzzled.

"But why didn't everybody come running in when they heard the sound of a shot?"

"There was a jet plane passing overhead. I guess they thought that was it; they were used to hearing the planes and they weren't used to hearing gunshots. Then I suppose they talked it over and decided a few minutes later to investigate . . . Come on, let's get out of here. I can't talk any more right now."

". . . pronounced dead at 10:18," said the voice on the radio.

The two men had been sitting in

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strained silence. Holliday turned the radio off and Garvey sighed.

"I never saw him but that once," Garvey murmured, "and I'd never heard of him till a few weeks before. But peace to his ashes. He was an unhappy man and I'll do as he wished."

"So now I guess you can tell me," said the lawyer. He filled their glasses. "Then we can both get some sleep. You're welcome to be my guest here till you've made your plans."

"I'll go back to Mexico, I think."

He was silent, gathering his thoughts. Then he shook himself and spoke in a firmer tone. Holliday didn't interrupt the story of the mother's suicide, of the orphanage, of the different foster homes that separated the brothers.

"He went bad. I was the good boy, who worked his way through high school and college, at all kinds of jobs, and finally made fairly good as a free-lance writer of magazine articles. And in the end I was the one who turned out to be a murderer." His voice was bitter as he went on with the story.

"Then, by sheer accident, I learned more about my mother."

He stood up and began to pace the room as he told Holliday about the newspaper account, about hunting up the neighbor who had heard the children crying and had found their mother dead, about searching out the birth and marriage and death records.

"Finally I came to the conclusion that Philip Garvey had never existed. He was a figment of my mother's imagination; it seemed that Garvey was her maiden name. The natural deduction was that we were both illegitimate. But I did find out that she had been married and divorced before that."

"To Morgan Johnston, eh?"

"Yes, and divorced the very next year. It was at that point that I made the mistake of looking Ricky up again and telling him about it."

"And I suppose he cooked up a scheme to blackmail Johnston. But on what grounds? Even if Johnston was running for public office, it wouldn't be much of a revelation that he had once been married briefly to a woman who had gone to the dogs afterward."

Ronald Garvey was silent. Even now, after everything, he felt such shame and guilt for Ricky that he had to struggle to go on.

"I'd have thought so too," he said at last, "even if it had ever entered my mind that he would do anything so outrageous . . . Things came to a head two days before—before the murder. He was living in a rooming house, and sometimes I'd visit him there.

"This day it was raining. It was a Saturday, and Ricky wasn't working—he had a job as a shipping clerk that he had to keep as a condition of his parole. It was too wet to go anywhere, and we were just sitting around his room talking.

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After a while he suggested that we get some delicatessen and eat there. Then he said, how about some beer? Well, he wasn't supposed to drink, but I wasn't going to be a prig about it. But he couldn't risk buying the liquor himself, so I said I'd go out and get the stuff.

"The storm had come up suddenly, and I didn't have a raincoat, so I borrowed his. I was in the market when I fished for my wallet, which I'd put in one of the pockets of the raincoat, and brought out an envelope that was in the pocket with it.

"They say that smart criminals are never caught, that only the stupid ones make mistakes. Ricky had been caught plenty, so he couldn't have been very smart, and this was one of his mistakes. He must have forgotten, when he lent me the coat, that he'd put the letter in it to mail."

"Addressed to Johnston?"

"Yes. It wasn't sealed, and, believe me, I'm not in the habit of reading other people's letters. Only, things Ricky had been hinting at all that afternoon—silly boasts and veiled remarks about striking it rich—had me worried. On an impulse I went to the Men's Room in the market, and took the letter out of the envelope.

"I didn't even read beyond the first page—that's why I didn't know he'd signed my name to it instead of his. No return address, I noticed. When I got hold of myself, I put the letter back in the coat pocket, returned to Ricky's room, and kept my mouth shut. I had a better chance of dealing with the situation if he didn't suspect I knew anything. So I haven't the letter to show, but that first page burned itself into my memory, and I can recite it almost verbatim.

"'Dear Dad,' it began—and that gave me my first jolt. 'This is my third letter, and my last. I'm leaving here the day after you get this, and I'll be turning up in your office. Have the money ready, and you'll never hear from me again. Otherwise I'll drop in at a few newspaper offices in your town—especially the one that's fighting your candidacy, ha-ha. They'll be interested to have an affidavit from your loving son about that funny marriage you got roped into when you were 21 with a cheap floozie from show biz. They'll be still more interested when I tell them how you found out she was sleeping around and how you got rid of her—but how you couldn't keep away from her, even when you'd moved her to another city. Did you visit her there or did she come back once in a while to see you?'"

"Good Lord!" Holliday exclaimed. "Was it true?"

"How can I know? But it wouldn't matter to Johnston whether it was true or not—just the accusation would ruin him, in business and politics both. He was ambitious, and he was on his way to be-

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ing a pretty big man in this State."

"But how could anyone talk that way about his own mother?"

"Exactly—even if he could hardly remember her. Well, you can guess the rest of what I read. We were both supposed to be Johnston's sons, conceived after the divorce. There was an open accusation that he'd never supported us, so that was our revenge. That's when I stopped reading.

"I had a hard time holding myself in till I could get through the rest of the day without making Ricky suspicious. I was trying to plan what to do. I had to keep on seeing him, because I didn't know how soon he'd mail that letter, and if he was going to leave town—which was another violation of his parole—he'd have to let me know or I might discover him missing and inquire of his parole officer.

"So I made a date with him for the very next evening, and that one he kept; but as we were parting he said, 'I won't be seeing you for a few days, Ron; my boss wants me to help out in one of our out-of-town branches where they're short-handed.' Well, you know shipping clerks are a dime a dozen, and they don't get sent out on out-of-town jobs. Still, it might have fooled me if I hadn't known what I knew.

"I wasn't going to let him get away with it. I booked a seat on a plane that night, and got here before dawn. I looked up Johnston's name in the phone book, and called him. I see now why he was so scared and told me to come there right away—I didn't know then that Ricky's letters had all been signed in my name.

"I can still see him, in his pajamas, his hair rumpled, his eyes wide with shock while I told him the whole story. But he made his mind up quickly. 'I'll get dressed and we'll have some breakfast,' he said, 'and then I'll take you to my office and if your brother comes we'll face him together.' I agreed; I thought between us we could break Ricky down. Of course Johnston didn't know I had the gun—I'd practically forgotten it myself. Well, you know the rest."

Ronald slumped back in his chair, exhausted. Holliday filled their glasses again, and for a time there was silence.

"We must try to get some sleep now, both of us," the lawyer said finally. "But I think I ought to tell you something." He was choosing his words carefully. "Just as I was leaving the prison, Johnston shook hands with me and looked straight into my eyes. 'Goodbye, Holliday, and thanks for everything,' he said. 'I'm sure now I made the right decision. Come to think of it, the way things are, a man's pretty lucky to have one good son—even one out of two.'

"Don't you realize that your brother must have guessed right? That Morgan Johnston *was* your father?"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 302nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . The author, Pamela Jayne King, was only 14 years old when she wrote this remarkable "first story"—one of the youngest writers ever to "break into print" in the pages of EQMM. It is worth noting that we did not change a single word in Miss King's "first story"—our only editing was a change here and there in punctuation.

Pamela Jayne King attends Bloomfield Hills Junior High School in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Her English teacher is Mrs. Sonneborn, and Miss King thinks that "as schools go, Bloomfield Hills Junior is great."

Here are some excerpts from two of Miss King's letters to your Editors: "Very few people [non-writers] take writing seriously—or, for that matter, take writers *seriously—especially when the writer is a junior-high-schooler" . . . "When I have a choice between finishing my homework and jotting down a really terrific idea for a story, there's certainly no question in my mind what I'm going to do" . . . "My only other hobby is my collection of pen-pals, but actually that's writing too" . . . "While writing my first novel sets me apart from kids my age, I can hardly pretend to be mature and sophisticated when the very mention of a Beatle's name makes me go all starry-eyed" . . . "I think that writing isn't a profession that you choose; rather, it chooses you."*

We are going to hear more from Pamela Jayne King—much more, we hope . . .

NIGHTMARE

by PAMELA JAYNE KING

TROYA PIERCE WALKED DOWN THE DARKENING STREET, SLOWLY, languidly. It was August, and torrid even then in the evening; but her mind was on other things. She smiled a luminous smile in the dark, so engrossed in her daydream that she didn't hear the night-

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mare fall into step behind her on the deserted street.

She came to a corner and stopped, peering into the darkness; but just for a moment the soft feline footsteps continued. She didn't turn or jerk at the sound, but caught her breath and hurried—*faster*. Smoothly her shaking hand slid into her pocket and smoothly emerged. A mirror.

When she next passed a street lamp she held it before her, and in the dim light caught a glimpse of the evil shadow that lurked behind, and of a fist clutching the silver terror of a knife.

She didn't run—perhaps she was too frightened—but tried to keep her breathing even as she turned up the next driveway, not daring to look back. Heart pounding, she knocked at the door. Behind her, on the sidewalk, she could hear the heavy breathing of her antagonist; waiting.

An eternity later, the door opened. A man, unshaven, sleepy, peered out at her from behind the screen.

"Oh, please," she whispered urgently, "let me in. I'm being followed and he's got a knife."

He blinked and opened the door just wide enough for her to slip inside. The room was dimly lit and a television blatted commercials. He studied her with an expression she couldn't read. "Want I should call the cops?"

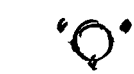
"Oh, no," she whispered breathlessly. "That is, I don't know. Should you?"

He shrugged disinterestedly. "Dunno. None o' my bother." He edged closer. "Pretty girl like you shouldn' be out on the streets this time o' night."

She realized with a fastidious shiver of distaste that he was drunk. On the television a woman screamed. She jumped, and the frightened feeling was with her again. "Well"—she laughed nervously—"thank you for letting me in, but I'm sure he's gone now."

She started for the door.

He was there before her, his face contorted in a horrible drunken leer. "Whatcher hurry?"



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***newest* Miss Phipps story by**

PHYLLIS BENTLEY

We welcome back—on her annual visit to the pages of EQMM—Miss Marian Phipps, writer of detective novels and shrewd amateur criminologist. Miss Phipps is always charming—except to murderers. In this newest adventure the spinster-sleuth unravels a perplexing mystery—a disappearance and murder involving a 700-year-old church, its graveyard, its Visitors' Book, and the curious clue of the ballpoint pen . . . One can have only the deepest affection for Maid Marian.

MISS PHIPPS AND THE INVISIBLE MURDERER

by PHYLLIS BENTLEY

"So this is Beckholme. What a lovely landscape! What a beautiful little church!" exclaimed Miss Phipps, walking toward the old wooden lychgate which guarded the entrance. "Seven hundred years old at least! Enfolded in these high hills— Delightful!"

She turned, and discovered she was speaking to empty air. Her niece, Ruth, at whose suburban home on the outskirts of the northern city of Laire she was making a longish visit, was just disembarking her two children from the car. It was Saturday; Ruth's husband, Michael, had gone off to the Laire golf links, so he was not in the party.

Immediately that Pamela, aged four, was set down on the ground she toddled at full speed toward the river, shrieking and waving her little arms aloft in joy. Stephen, her six-year-old brother, ran headlong after her, and Ruth chased them both, for the river banks here were low, and the narrow stream was swift and rocky. Ruth caught a hand of each of her children, and came back across the grass to meet Miss Phipps, not without rebellion from Pamela.

"You'll want to see the church—do you mind going in alone, Aunt Marian? I must keep an eye on these two," said Ruth. Taking her aunt's consent for granted, she turned to the car. "Let's get the food out, shall we, children? It's rather early, but I think we may as well have our picnic now."

With that gleeful pleasure in food characteristic of the young of all species, Stephen and Pam rushed to assist their mother, shouting a

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good deal and getting in her way, all with the best intentions.

Miss Phipps stood for a moment admiring the landscape again—the towering lonely fells, with cloud shadows moving across their sunlit flanks, the old farmhouses scattered here and there on their lower slopes, the one-arched bridge spanning the silver river, and the gray old church.

She passed through the lychgate and began to move about among the old gravestones, some lying flat in the long grass, some erect, some aslant; she stooped to decipher with interest the worn, half-obliterated names, and entered any inscription which took her fancy in the notebook she always carried.

"Can I help you?" said a courteous voice.

She looked up. A lanky young man, hatless, with thin fair hair, heavy spectacles, and a worried expression, stood at her side. From his dress he was a cleric, from his look he had his troubles.

"If you are searching for some grave in particular, I may be able to help you," he continued.

"Er—no, thank you," said Miss Phipps coldly.

His look of unhappiness deepened, and Miss Phipps felt she had been unkind.

"It's just that I collect names from graveyards," she explained with reluctance. She realized from his look of astonishment that this sounded odd, and went on hurriedly, "I'm a writer, you see. A novelist," she added with distaste—she hated making confidences of this kind to a stranger.

"Oh, really! How interesting!" exclaimed the young man, cheering up. He hesitated, then went on, "My name is Robert Vesey. I'm the curate-in-charge here. Would it be impertinent to ask—"

"My name is Marian Phipps," said Miss Phipps, scowling and looking down.

"Oh, how delightful! This is indeed a pleasure," said Mr. Vesey, bowing. "I enjoy your detective stories very much indeed. But I mustn't intrude on you while you're at work. You must wish to be alone." He bowed again and turned away toward the gate.

"Thank you!" exclaimed Miss Phipps. Her gratitude was real, for she could never "observe" creatively in company. Few people understood this, she found; Vesey must have a sensitive perception. Pleased, she passed through the church porch, and entered the building.

She knew a reasonable amount about architectural chronology, and prowled about the building with much enjoyment, observing the Latin inscription on the rood screen, the very early arch of the tower, the crude local work in the north arcade. She peeped into the bare little vestry, and craned over the bronze on the tomb in the side chapel.

At length satisfied that she had

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seen all that was to be seen in the church, she dropped two coins in the box on a table beside the font, labeled "For the Preservation of the Fabric Fund," and turned to write her name in the Visitors' Book which lay beside it. A neat ballpoint pen was, she found, available.

"Not before it was needed," said Miss Phipps aloud, gazing with some distaste at the splashed and untidy page of signatures, which had obviously been written with an old-fashioned and spluttery nibbed pen. An almost empty and very grimy glass inkwell, of the kind used in schools in Miss Phipps's youth—"It has probably been here ever since," thought Miss Phipps irritably—seemed to confirm this view.

"Butterworth," said Miss Phipps, reading the last name inscribed. Below this, at the foot of the page, there were two vacant lines; the upper one of these was defaced by a couple of sizable and irregular black blots. Miss Phipps, who admitted to a certain pride in her own rather dashing signature, wrinkled her nose fastidiously, rejected this messy area, and wrote her name and address on the lower line.

"Do come, Aunt Marian!" called Stephen rather crossly from the door. "Everything's ready—we're waiting for you."

Miss Phipps carefully put down the ballpoint pen—even in the haste necessitated by a child's hunger she could not do violence to a writing instrument—and left the church in a rush. Stephen was already some way down the path. "Oh, I beg your pardon!" she exclaimed as she collided on the porch with a person coming in.

"Granted, I'm sure," said the girl in a scoffing tone.

Miss Phipps disentangled herself with some vexation. She did not like the girl's mockery, and looking at her closely, did not like her appearance either. Basically, reflected Miss Phipps, she is attractive enough: a shapely figure inclining to the plump, abundant dark hair, bright dark eyes, a full mouth, and a wide but not uncomely nose.

But all these good features were distorted, exaggerated, plastered—she boasted (boasted, Miss Phipps felt, was the operative word) false eyelashes and green eye-shadow, heavily tinted cheeks, palely larded lips, and a huge superstructure of hair so elaborate that one wondered if it were taken down and brushed more often than once a week; her pale green slacks and matching sweater were intentionally much too tight, and her green scarf was patterned with huge scarlet squiggles—so that as a sexual display she ruined her effect by overstatement.

The girl's glance was insolent, her smile contemptuous; it was obvious that she despised an "oldie" like Miss Phipps most heartily. Miss Phipps repressed a desire to indicate that the contempt was mutual, and walked on feeling huffed. There was a stir—birds,

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perhaps—behind a grave as she passed.

The picnic luncheon was agreeably laid out in the shelter of a grassy hollow that Ruth had discovered some 50 yards down the river, and in the eager cries of the children and in the business of supplying their wants and coping with the usual difficulties of picnics—the overturned milk bottle, the fair division of sandwiches, the intrusive wasp—Miss Phipps's irritation was soothed, though not forgotten.

On the following Monday morning, after Michael had gone to work leaving the county newspaper behind him, Stephen, whose summer holiday was not quite over, ran to Miss Phipps with the paper in his hand.

"Look, Aunt Marian!" he said triumphantly, pointing. "That's the lady we saw by the church at the picnic."

"So it is," agreed Miss Phipps, for the portrait, though coarsened in the reproduction, was undoubtedly that of the girl on the porch.

"Miss Eunice Harden," spelled out Stephen.

"That's right," agreed Miss Phipps in a careless tone. She threw the paper aside, for she had already perceived from the picture's caption that Miss Eunice Harden was missing from her aunt's home and was being searched for by the police, and she did not wish to communicate this to Stephen. When he ran off on some ploy of his own, she re-opened the newspaper and read the paragraphs accompanying the picture with more attention.

Miss Eunice Harden, it appeared, was an orphan who divided her time between an aunt in Laire, and another aunt and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Barrett, in Beckholme. She had last been seen in the kitchen of her aunt's farm in Beckholme on Saturday morning, but then had vanished.

At first, no anxiety had been felt, for it was presumed she had returned to her aunt in Laire. There had been a slight tiff, confessed Mrs. Barrett apologetically, between herself and her niece that morning; she had perhaps been a little sharp about Eunice's make-up, which she thought excessive for a sheep farm way out in the fells. Eunice was a hot-tempered girl—spirited, you might say; it was just like her to fling off to Laire; she had, in fact, done it before and taken a job there, but all too soon had given it up and returned to Beckholme.

The day being Saturday, there was a bus from the village a mile or two down the valley to the nearest market town, where there was plenty of transport to Laire.

The next morning, Sunday, Mrs. Barrett had asked the curate-in-charge, whom she saw at church, to telephone to her sister in Laire; but Eunice had not been seen there.

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Uneasy, Mrs. Barrett went to Eunice's room to see if she had left a farewell note; she had not done so, nor had she taken a suitcase with her. Even her handbag remained on the dressing table. Now alarmed, Mrs. Barrett informed the local policeman. Exhaustive inquiries were being made, round Beckholme and in Laire.

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," mourned Miss Phipps. "Now I shall have to go to the police station. And I'm very much afraid," she added, explaining the affair to Ruth who was at work in the kitchen, "that I shall have to take Stephen with me."

"You can't do that without consulting Michael," said Ruth quickly, raising her head from the stove.

"You're right. But the fact is, Stephen saw the girl—he must have met her on the pathway when he came to the church to fetch me. He recognized her picture in the newspaper."

"If you saw her on the porch, surely that's enough."

On that day the police seemed to share this view. Miss Phipps having telephoned the Laire police headquarters, a polite young man in civilian clothes turned up at Ruth's house, took down the description of Eunice's dress as furnished by Miss Phipps, and listened carefully but without much interest to Stephen's declaration that he had recognized the lady's picture in the paper, that he had met her on the church pathway, and that she had dark hair and wore "very tight trousers."

But on Wednesday matters took a different turn. While the family was still at breakfast the young detective appeared again, looking grave, with a police car in which he requested Miss Phipps to accompany him to police headquarters. Miss Phipps, however, declined this and took her own. He asked Stephen many searching questions, repeating them once or twice in different forms. What did the lady look like? How was she dressed? Was Stephen going to the church or coming away? Why did he go to the church? Was his aunt inside? Where was she? Was she writing? Did the lady wear a hat? Did he see anybody else near the church? What color was the lady's dress? Who else did he see? All these Stephen answered staunchly, without hesitation or variation, though with a growing impatience.

"She had dark hair—piled up very high," he said.

"But what color was her dress?"

"It wasn't a dress, they were trousers, very tight. I've told you before," said Stephen crossly.

"And what color were they?"

"I don't *know*. A pale color. Green, I think. They were very tight."

"Detective Inspector Dale, from the area which includes Beckholme, asked us to get in touch with you, Miss Phipps," said the Superintendent.

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"You told him I had seen Eunice?"

"No. Well, yes; but the point is, your name is in the Visitors' Book at Beckholme Church—and your address. Dale telephoned the appropriate police in London; they tried to find where you were, and eventually phoned Chief-Inspector Tarrant in Brittlesea, whose wife knew you were staying with your niece in Laire. So Dale communicated with us; of course we already knew your whereabouts."

Miss Phipps thought for a moment.

"But why did my name in the Visitors' Book interest Inspector Dale in the first place?" she inquired, perplexed. "How did he come to look at the book, to think it might be relevant?"

"Miss Phipps," said the Superintendent, very grim. "The body of Eunice Harden was discovered in deep grass behind a gravestone in a far corner of the graveyard, towards the river."

"Her *body*!"

"Yes. She had been dead for several days. Strangled. A police dog found her."

"Poor silly girl," said Miss Phipps with compassion. "Was it manual strangulation?"

"No. Her scarf. You mentioned yourself that she was wearing a green red-patterned scarf. Doesn't take much strength, you know."

"She was rather a 'murderee,'" said Miss Phipps sadly.

"What do you mean by that?"

"There's a vulgar word for it which I won't use," said Miss Phipps. "Let's say she enjoyed exciting men."

The Superintendent snorted. "Sexy," he said. "When the body was found in the graveyard, of course the church itself became of prime interest. The dog, in fact, traced her from the Harden farm to the church, and then to the corner where she was found."

"Well—I'm very sorry," said Miss Phipps. "If I can be of any help, Superintendent—"

"Chief-Inspector Tarrant told Dale of the shrewdness of your observation."

"There's nothing to observe in this case as far as I can see."

"Do you see anyone in these that you know?" said the Superintendent, suddenly strewing half a dozen photographs along the table in front of her.

They were of various shapes and sizes and showed different persons, but each portrayed a very young, very fair girl, with large gray eyes. Miss Phipps examined them carefully.

"No," she said.

"Ever seen any of them?"

"No."

"Sure you didn't see any of them at Beckholme on Saturday?"

"Quite sure. Pretty young things. This is the nicest face, I think," said Miss Phipps, pointing.

"That one," said the Superin-

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tendent grimly, "happens to be Miss Celia Whitaker."

"And who is she?"

"She is the daughter of a hotel owner in a seaside resort on the far side of the county. At present she is a resident student at Laire University."

"How does she come into this affair?"

"There is talk of an engagement between Miss Celia and the Reverend Robert Vesey."

"And why not? She looks like a thoroughly nice girl," said Miss Phipps. "Oh, Vesey. Curate-in-charge at Beckholme, of course. I saw him there. A very nice young man."

"You saw *him* there? You didn't mention that before! When did you see him?"

"He came out of the church as I was going in."

"Did you actually see him in the act of emerging?"

"Well, no," said Miss Phipps. "I was examining a gravestone. He spoke to me and I looked up and saw him."

"Miss Phipps, this is a very important statement. I am sure you realize its gravity. Robert Vesey could have murdered Eunice, placed her body where it was found, then come round the corner of the church and seen you. It was too risky to try to slip by you unobserved, so he spoke to you."

"I am afraid, Superintendent," said Miss Phipps coldly, "that you are quite on the wrong track. Not only is Robert Vesey a kindly, sensitive young man who wouldn't hurt a fly, much less strangle a robust young woman in his own church grounds in the middle of a sunny morning—"

"Almost any man is capable of murder, if he's entangled with a bad woman and wants to marry a good one."

"—but also, you may perhaps remember that Stephen and I both saw Eunice, alive, *after* Mr. Vesey's departure."

"Stephen didn't see Vesey and therefore doesn't know whether Eunice was alive after he left, or not."

"But I do, Superintendent," said Miss Phipps firmly.

"Vesey could have returned later."

"Anybody could have entered the church later without being seen by our party. We were fifty yards away, in a hollow by the river."

"You saw nobody enter?"

"No."

"Nobody leave?"

"No. But that proves nothing."

"Quite. Miss Phipps, this fresh statement from you opens up an even more unpleasant possibility.

"How so?"

"Are you sure that nobody was in the church when you entered?"

"Quite sure. *Quite* sure. The church is a small one, and I inspected it thoroughly."

"Did you enter the vestry?"

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"I didn't enter, but I looked in. There was nobody there."

"She might have been hiding behind the surplices."

"I don't remember seeing any choir surplices," said Miss Phipps thoughtfully. "Ordinary white choir surplices? No. You said that *she* might have been hiding. Who is *she?*"

"You tell me."

"I haven't the least idea. Unless—Butterworth? No, that's not possible, because of the pen used for the Butterworth signature. It wasn't there. And the ink of the signature was black—old."

There was a pause.

"Miss Phipps," said the Superintendent in a tone of vexation, "I'm afraid your observation is not as acute as Chief-Inspector Tarrant claims."

"Superintendent," said Miss Phipps, crimsoning, "will you please make an appointment for me to meet Inspector Dale at Beckholme Church, at half-past eleven this morning."

"Well, it might be useful," mused the Superintendent. "I don't see how it possibly can be useful—but still, this is an uncomfortable case. I won't leave anything untried."

"Thank you," said Miss Phipps icily.

"I hope you had a pleasant drive, Miss Phipps," said Inspector Dale with cold politeness. "About two hours from Laire, I believe."

"Yes," agreed Miss Phipps, who had covered the distance in considerably less time. "This is very beautiful country. But lonely, of course. Remote. Not much for a girl like Eunice to do. Still, I suppose there are a few young men about, even here."

The Inspector looked at her thoughtfully. "Yes," he said. "We get quite a few tourists in the summer, you know. Now if you'll come into the church, Miss Phipps, I will show you—"

"What?"

The Inspector was silent until they had reached the small table by the font. He opened the Visitors' Book at yesterday's entries—there were none for today; the policeman on duty at the lychgate had doubtless kept visitors out. Dale pointed and said, "This."

Miss Phipps bent and read her own signature. On the line above it was now written, with a ballpoint pen and in a large round hand: *Celia Whitaker.*

"No!" exclaimed Miss Phipps, starting back violently. "That signature was not there when I wrote mine. The last signature was *Butterworth*, and I left a line blank—between Butterworth and my name."

"Why?"

"Because of those disgusting blots," explained Miss Phipps.

"You suggest that Miss Whitaker entered the church after you and entered her name above yours to give her, as it were, an alibi?"

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"I suggest nothing of the kind!"

"How do you explain this circumstance, then?"

"I don't. Celia must be asked to explain it, surely."

"Either she was here in the church before you—"

"She was not."

"She might have been hiding in the vestry."

"She was not."

"Behind the choir surplices."

"There were no surplices when I looked into the vestry."

"Kindly come with me, Miss Phipps," said Inspector Dale brusquely, striding off up the aisle.

"You don't believe a word I say," said Miss Phipps, panting after him.

The Inspector threw open the vestry doors. A neat row of white surplices depending on hangers from a long coat-stand was revealed—also, the Reverend Robert Vesey, sitting at a table with an open register before him.

"Ah, good morning, Inspector," he said, rising. "Miss Phipps! How nice to see you again."

"These surplices were not here during my visit to the church last Saturday morning," said Miss Phipps.

"No. One of my parishioners launders them each week and returns them on Saturday afternoon, so that they are always clean for Sunday."

"There, you see!" said Miss Phipps to the Inspector.

Dale scowled, then explained. "Miss Phipps has come to see if she can help our investigation into this shocking affair of the murder."

"It's shocking and terrible indeed," said the young man, frowning. "Poor young woman. I have written to the Bishop suggesting that reconsecration of the church is advisable, but I have had no reply as yet."

"You think the murder was committed in the church?" asked the Inspector.

"I've no idea. But just to be on the safe side. Have you made any progress in your investigation, Inspector?"

"We've been looking in your Visitors' Book."

"Oh, really? I brought a new pen last Saturday—I'd just placed it by the book when I saw you, Miss Phipps."

"You were in the church before Miss Phipps?"

"I always come in to say Matins," said Mr. Vesey quietly. "Sometimes I'm a little late, but if it's before noon—"

"Did you see anyone else in the building? No? Will you examine the Visitors' Book with me, sir?"

"Certainly," agreed Mr. Vesey, rising and following the Inspector down the aisle. Miss Phipps trailed after them. "Though I don't see—Celia!" he exclaimed as the book was opened before him. He colored and looked very young. "Miss Whitaker and I are about to become engaged, Inspector," he said with dignity.

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"You have probably heard that from Beckholme parishioners. But she was not here last Saturday."

"When was she here?" put in Miss Phipps quickly.

"Monday."

"The day Eunice Harden's disappearance was mentioned in the morning newspapers," said the Inspector.

"Yes."

"She knew she could find you here in the church before noon in the morning," pursued the Inspector.

"Yes. But she was not here last Saturday. I don't understand the placing of the signature," said Mr. Vesey.

"Your evidence of changing the pen would prove that Miss Whitaker could not have written her signature before you came in on the Saturday in question," said the Inspector, "and the placing of the signature shows that it was written before that of Miss Phipps."

"No! My evidence contradicts that," said Miss Phipps firmly.

The Inspector scowled again.

"I shall have to question Miss Celia Whitaker," he said.

"Certainly," agreed Miss Phipps. ("And so shall I," she added silently.)

Miss Phipps, having friends in authority in Laire University, knew whom to approach, received prompt attention, and was passed rapidly along the line until she found herself entering the snack canteen in charge of a student in Social Studies who knew Celia Whitaker.

She rather paled at the scene before her. Hundreds—at first sight there appeared to be thousands—of young people of both sexes sat, stood, crouched, or perched around and on small round tables and casual chairs, drinking coffee or orangeade and devouring sandwiches, which they obtained from an intimidating machine by the door. Enormous thick woolen sweaters concealed agreeable figures, long hair dripped into cups, black stockings (unmended) abounded, papers and books were strewn thickly over the floor. There was a loud hum of eager discussion.

Miss Phipps felt daunted by the probable difficulty of discovering one person among so many, but her student guide picked Celia out easily and by energetic signals soon brought her to the door. She looked rather cleaner than many of her companions and her straight fair hair was well brushed. She scowled reluctantly at Miss Phipps until her visitor remarked that she brought a message from Robert Vesey, and then her expression changed.

Miss Phipps's guide took them to a large empty room housing a piano, and left. The silence was welcome.

"Now, my dear child," said Miss Phipps soothingly, "I am on your side and you can trust me. But we must clear all this up, you know. The

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police will soon be here to question you."

"Yes, they've been trying to do so all morning. But they couldn't find me. I've dodged them," said Celia gleefully.

"You've been to Beckholme this week?"

"Yes. I went up after I read about Eunice Harden being missing. It was in the newspapers on Monday morning. I have a little Mini—father gave it to me on my last birthday, so it was easy."

"But why did you go, my dear?"

"I was worried about Bob—Mr. Vesey. He's too good, that's the trouble with him. He had a terrible time with that awful Eunice; she chased him all over the place; a real nympho. She would even come to the church sometimes in the mornings, knowing she would find him there. From the Harden farm you can see part of the lane to the church."

"I'm afraid that's just what the police guess," said Miss Phipps gravely.

"Yes, Bob had to be awfully careful to keep out of her way," said Celia. "She went after every man in sight, you know."

"Who do you think could have murdered her?" asked Miss Phipps.

"Oh, lots!" said Celia.

"But she had a right to her life."

"Oh, of course," said Celia, looking serious. "But she asked for it, you know."

"Now, my dear Celia," said Miss Phipps soberly, "I am going to ask you a tiresome question, and you must—I repeat, *must*—answer it truthfully. You were at Beckholme on Monday and you put your name in the Visitors' Book above mine, which was written on Saturday morning. Why above mine?"

"Well, it was one of those things which seemed like a good idea at the time," said Celia. "You see, I cut a lot of lectures and things to go to the church, and we're not supposed to leave the University on weekdays. Saturday would be all right. So I had the idea of filling up this vacant line, a page back, to give me a kind of alibi. While I was waiting for Bob, it just popped into my mind, and I did it. It was a silly idea, I suppose."

"It was," agreed Miss Phipps.

"It was silly of me to put my name in the book at all," said Celia. "I don't usually write in his silly old book. But while I was waiting for Bob, you see, it was something to do—to turn over the pages and write my name."

"It was more than silly," said Miss Phipps gravely.

"Really? There was a spot of bother last week about a girl cutting lectures, you know," said Celia. "But I see that it was silly."

"It was a lie," said Miss Phipps.

Celia pouted.

"And it's going to get you and your young man into a lot of trouble."

"Nobody could think Bob would

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do anything wrong," said Celia quickly.

"The police may well think that both you and Mr. Vesey had cause to hate Eunice because he had been involved in an affair with her."

"Oh, nonsense! He never even called her by her first name. Of course he had to go to the farm sometimes, to see Mrs. Barrett about the surplices."

"The surplices!" exclaimed Miss Phipps.

"Yes, Mrs. Barrett launders them, you know."

"And returns them on Saturday afternoon," said Miss Phipps thoughtfully.

"Well, she wouldn't return them always *herself*," said Celia in a judicial tone. "Bob might call for them, or Mr. Barrett or Eunice might bring them—they have a car, of course; all farmers have a car nowadays, but I don't think Mrs. Barrett drives."

Miss Phipps picked up her bag and gloves. "I must go," she said. "Celia, you *must* tell the police at once the reason for your misplaced signature."

Celia pouted again.

"I shall get into trouble with my Professor or somebody," she said fearfully.

"That's your fault for telling, or rather writing, a lie," said Miss Phipps sternly. "Can you prove you were in Laire on Saturday morning?"

"I shouldn't think so," said Celia. "I was working in the Library."

Miss Phipps groaned.

The door of the farmhouse was opened by a tall, gaunt, elderly woman, with plain features, untidy gray hair, sallow skin, large sad dull eyes—and strong hands, noticed Miss Phipps.

"Mrs. Barrett? My name is Marian Phipps. I'm a friend of Mr. Vesey and Miss Whitaker, and deeply concerned about this terrible affair of your niece."

Mrs. Barrett was silent.

"May I come in and have a word with you?"

"I suppose you must," said Mrs. Barrett ungraciously.

The kitchen was large and handsomely furnished, with fine oak beams, a superb fire, a large ginger cat lying asleep on the hearth. The cat opened an eye at Miss Phipps and closed it again, reassured. Mrs. Barrett indicated a wheelback chair and put the kettle on the fire.

"Mr. Vesey mentioned you," she said in slow country tones. "Of course we don't do much reading or such out here."

"Mrs. Barrett," said Miss Phipps in a comfortable, woman-to-woman voice, "What kind of girl was your niece?"

"She was a wicked girl, Miss Phipps," said Mrs. Barrett, fetching a teapot. "She couldn't leave the men alone. Time and again Ethel and I—Ethel's my sister in Laire—

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have rued the day we took her. But we thought it our duty. Of course Eunice—well, she had a bad start; she was illegitimate, you know."

"Indeed," said Miss Phipps gravely.

"Yes. My brother was always wild, Harden isn't Eunice's legal name, but we thought it best she should be called by her father's name. People know us up here. We didn't want to give her a bad start, you see."

"I take it her parents are dead."

"That's right. Her mother was nothing. My brother was always wild. And then he didn't get on with my husband, you see."

Miss Phipps meditated on the significance of this last statement, and at length remarked, "Your brother worked here, then?"

"Of course. It was his farm," said Mrs. Barrett with a rather sad smile. "And mine and Ethel's, of course. Father left it to the three of us."

"Oh, I see."

"Yes, indeed. Hardens have been here for nigh on two hundred years," said Mrs. Barrett proudly. "People hereabouts still call it Hardens', sometimes."

"How did Eunice get on with your own children, Mrs. Barrett?"

"I have no children," said the woman, turning her head aside.

"Who took the choir surplices to the church last Saturday?" asked Miss Phipps brusquely, changing the subject.

"My husband and I did. Soon after Eunice left," said Mrs. Barrett. She looked Miss Phipps straight in the eye, and her sallow face flushed.

"She's lying," thought Miss Phipps. "But how? And why?"

She paused to reflect. Just then a car suddenly sounded in the yard outside. Mrs. Barrett stood up, and the cat bounded away and curled itself on the window sill behind the curtain.

Somehow this last action shook all that Miss Phipps had heard into a pattern, and she was not surprised by the appearance of the man who entered the room.

Short but stocky, with broad shoulders and strong hands, high-complexioned, with a large loose red mouth, a bold nose, thick eyebrows, bright insolent brown eyes, tumbled dark curly hair; handsome in a coarsely sensual way, and years younger than his wife; many years younger.

Miss Phipps understood immediately why Mrs. Barrett's brother had left home, why Barrett had married a woman so much older and plainer than himself, what he thought of his barren wife, what had happened between him and his sexy niece, why the cat disliked him, why Mrs. Barrett had lied about the surplices for the husband she adored so foolishly.

"Enter a murderer," thought Miss Phipps.

And as usual, Miss Phipps was right.

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Every story that we have brought to you by J. F. Peirce has been distinguished—every one has been unusual and original, especially in concept. This new story by Mr. Peirce is no exception. Perhaps it is the most unusual, the most original, he has yet written . . .

THE PALE FACE OF THE RIDER

by J. F. PEIRCE

HEIDELBERG, GERMANY—(UPI)—The studio home of artist Jacob Kunstler was destroyed by fire last night under circumstances suggesting murder, suicide, and arson. All occupants of the house perished.

Dead are internationally famed artist Jacob Kunstler, 75; his daughter Katrina, 50; his housekeeper Berta Keppler, 78; and Walter and Wilhelm Keppler, both 70, twin brothers of the housekeeper and companions to Miss Kunstler,

Authorities theorize that the artist, who was suffering from an incurable disease, slew his daughter and the Kepplers and then set fire to the house before taking his own life.

Though Kunstler produced relatively few paintings during his lifetime, his meticulous craftsmanship earned him an international reputation. Critics considered him the world's leading exponent of *trompe l'oeil* (trick the eye), paintings characterized by a feeling of three dimensions, in which objects seem to stand out from the canvas and the eyes of portraits follow the viewer.

During World War II, Kunstler was a known consort of Hitler, himself an amateur artist, and a frequent visitor at Berchtesgaden. There had been talk of the Allies arresting Kunstler and expropriating his property after the war, but for reasons that have never been made known, no action was taken against him.

Ten years have passed since the above article appeared in newspapers throughout the world, and more than twenty since the end of war in Europe. As Kunstler has no known living relatives and as I, more than anyone else, am responsible that no action was taken against him, I feel it is time to reveal the reasons . . .

In May of 1945 I stood on the Altan, or balcony, of Heidelberg Castle, situated high on the Jettenbühl, and looked down on the narrow city with its snake-like main street, the Hauptstrasse, which slithers along following the Neckar River.

The city showed but little sign of

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damage. Rumor had it that there had been a gentlemen's agreement (similar to the one that saved the Ponte Vecchio with its ancient silversmith shops from the fate of the other bridges of Florence) that if Oxford were spared, Heidelberg would be also.

At first the ruins of the old castle had reminded me of the bomb damage to cities that had been 80 to 90 per cent destroyed, but the absence of rubble soon dissipated this illusion.

I experienced mixed emotions as I looked down on the city. Disappointment that this too had not been destroyed (because of what had happened to so many millions of people) fought with my pleasure in seeing once again a city almost whole, one seemingly untouched by war and unreason.

Had I come here first to get a comprehensive view of the city, the more easily to set about my job of requistioning houses and buildings for the military government? Or was I merely postponing the unpleasant task of arresting Kunstler? I could not make up my mind.

It would have been easier if I had not met and liked the little man when he had exhibited his pictures in New York before the war. He had also lectured at the university where I taught, and I had been selected to introduce him, had entertained him in my home, had got to know and like him.

He was a humble man, soft-spoken, gentle, and kindly. And though many years my senior, he treated me as a contemporary, as an equal in intelligence and experience. He had all the instincts of a teacher, but though he was more than willing to impart "the tricks of his trade," as he called them, he could not, unfortunately, impart his genius, the vast skill with which he painted.

My most vivid memory of him is on his hands and knees on the living-room floor, playing with my baby daughter. His love of children, his wonder of them, was one of his most endearing qualities.

"You are a family man, Herr Kunstler?" I asked.

He had been most free in discussing his work, but had said nothing about himself, his life, his family.

"Yes, but my wife has been dead for many years," he answered.

"You have children?"

"A daughter."

Though he spoke excellent English, with only the merest trace of accent, he gave the word a peculiar inflection.

"You must love her very much," I said. "She must be very special."

Special? Why had his pronunciation of such a simple word caused me to respond so strangely?

"Yes," he answered after a pause, as if he too had been evaluating my response, "she is very special."

And that was all I had been able to get from him. He had turned all other personal questions deftly aside . . .

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Now I had come to Heidelberg to arrest him, to expropriate his property.

Why had such a gentle man allied himself with a monster like Hitler, I wondered. How had he become involved with, of all people, the Nazis? Surely there must have been a reason.

My eyes followed the course of the river with its tower bridge.

"Where is the University?" I asked.

"In various buildings throughout the city," my guide answered. He was a one-armed man who had been assigned to me by the Burgomeister. "It does not have a campus as do universities in your country. You wish me to point the buildings out to you?"

"Another time," I answered.

"Perhaps you would like to see the great beer vat that holds 49,000 gallons?"

"No. Some other time. Take me to Herr Kunstler."

The door was opened by an elderly woman. Powdery. Dry as dust. Her whole manner was too sweet. Her face was masked by a vague smile.

I asked to see Herr Kunstler, and she disappeared for a few moments, then returned and invited us to step inside.

She did not talk so much as prattle, for though I prided myself on my German, I could understand only about every third word.

I looked at my guide, who gave me a sickly grin and shrugged. Obviously he was having no better luck understanding her than I was.

"Herr Kun tler will be with us shortly," he said.

I had got that much. It was the rest I could not follow. Something about Herr Kunstler's daughter—what a lovely little girl she was (I had expected her to be a grown woman). So very sweet, the old woman said. Everyone loved her, loved to hear her play the piano; she played so beautifully. In fact, she was considered a prodigy.

Unable to under tand the old woman, I dismissed her abruptly, and was at once sorry. But she seemed not to notice as she bubbled off to another part of the house.

I looked about me. The exterior of the house had been commonplace but the interior was extraordinary —how extraordinary I was soon to discover.

The room we were in was a combination salon-studio, two stories high, with a huge studio window at the rear that opened onto an enclosed garden, and a spiral staircase that led to the upper reaches of the house. The studio had the usual artist's paraphernalia—easel, palette, table, a small platform with a table for still-life arrangements. The salon had a grand piano and a collection of antiques grouped in front of a fireplace.

Though I knew little about antiques I could tell that these were the real thing. Their mirror-like

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surfaces reflected the "world" around them and generations of loving care. Each stroke of the polishing cloth had been a loving caress.

I picked up a book of paintings by Hieronymus Bosch from one of the tables and began to thumb through it but was interrupted almost immediately by the little girl's entrance.

I was shocked to discover that "the little girl" was a dwarf.

Her age was indeterminable from her appearance, but I know now that she was 40. She reminded me of the dwarf in Velasquez' "The Maids of Honor," but the lines of her face and body were somewhat softer, not quite so brutalized. There was no sign of intelligence in her face, no light or sparkle in her eyes.

Accompanying her was a tall "boneless" creature of sixty, one of the Keppler twins. And they were joined moments later by his "mirror."

The twins were, in effect, sexless —not men but birds. Their great hooked noses and pointed chins gave the appearance of beaks, especially when they chattered, which was constantly.

The two birds pranced about the little girl, leading her to the piano, helping her onto the stool (from which her short legs dangled), urging her to play.

She played mechanically, and though she made no mistakes, her playing was at best pedestrian. It reminded me of Dr. Samuel Johnson's comment to Boswell about a woman's preaching, which he compared to a dog's walking on its hind legs. It was not done well, but I was surprised to find that she could play at all with such short stubby fingers.

Then the three "children"—for that is what they really were—began playing hide-and-seek in and out of the room.

I felt sick inside, but the old lady, who had returned, smiled and nodded her approval.

Then from behind me Herr Kunstler said, "You wish to see me?"—and I wondered how long he had been standing there watching.

I turned and he recognized me, started to smile, to raise his hand, but the smile faded and the hand fell—till I offered my own in greeting.

"You know now why my daughter is so special," he said, "why I love her so much."

It was a statement of fact, and he spoke without any apparent bitterness.

I sought for words but found none.

Sensing my embarrassment, he quickly continued, "You will come with me, please. I will show you the house."

He led the way up the spiral staircase to the second floor on which the little girl and her two ageless companions apparently "lived." The walls curved in and

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out, taking sudden sharp turns in an endless, maze-like pattern.

At first I thought that the walls were ornately carved, but it was a trick of the eye—*trompe l'oeil*. The "carving" having been painted on the flat surface. From a distance everything seemed three-dimensional, but up close the illusion faded.

Each room was so much "stage scenery"—part of a fantastic world peopled with dwarfs and "birds," a world that Herr Kunstler had created.

Of all the rooms, the little girl's was the most unusual. The paintings on the walls were of other little girls like herself playing games together. They seemed about to step from the wall into the room or to be on the point of disappearing through the wall to the other side.

Then Herr Kunstler led the way to another part of the house, to his own bed-sitting room.

We had reached the center of his room when the guide beside me gasped.

"It moved!" he said.

I followed the line of his gaze. He was staring at a most unusual painting, in which a skeletal rider astride a skeletal horse could be seen clearly amid the planes and angles that formed the wasteland of a disintegrating world.

"It moved!" he repeated.

"You're imagining things," I said.

Herr Kunstler smiled.

"Would you care to examine it more closely?" he asked.

I moved toward it, and the horse and rider seemed to retreat before me, growing smaller and smaller, as if sucked into the swirling background, to disappear into the limbo from which they had come—like a motion picture reversed.

"I'll be damned!" I said.

I stepped back, and the picture metamorphosed as I continued to move backward. Its colors and shapes glided into and through one another. The horse and rider came galloping toward me, the rider swinging his great scythe, reaping a grim harvest of faceless creatures cowering in his path.

I would have sworn that I heard hollow hoofbeats, growing louder and louder, but it may have been the beating of my heart.

A pale horse and his rider, Death, with Hell following after, and war and famine and wild beasts. And there was a great earthquake, and the horse leaped over the cracks in the gaping earth. The sun became black, the moon blood-red, and the stars fell in the sky.

And then, as I thought that the horse would leap out of the frame, the rider cut me down, and horse and rider disappeared in a swirl of dust that became a mushroom cloud.

I stood shaking with fright, my mouth open, a scream of terror echoing in my ears.

How much of what I had seen was

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real? How much was pure imagined? Was the painting a kind of "motion picture," a trick of the eye, or both? Were there really faceless creatures being harvested by the Grim Reaper in the picture, or was I remembering "Revelation"?

I took a step forward and once again the horse and rider burst into being, like the phoenix reborn from its ashes. And as I moved slowly toward them, they again retreated before me, the rider raising his scythe to his bony shoulder in readiness to strike again.

As far as I could tell, Kunstler had combined the techniques of Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" and the three-dimensional effect of *trompe l'oeil*—and something more. But what that "something more" was, I could not tell.

Obviously he had done a series of paintings, one on top of another, using luminous, transparent colors that could be seen yet seen through —so that as the spectator moved forward, he saw through more and more layers of paintings to the painting beneath, until he finally beheld the very first one. And as he stepped back, fleeing from the galloping rider, he came closer and closer to the surface until at last he beheld the painting on top.

The bottom and the top, the beginning and the end—the macrocosm in the microcosm of a work of art . . .

Why didn't I arrest Herr Kunstler, expropriate his property? Because I simply could not. Though he had been admittedly a consort of Hitler, I thought I knew why—because he was the father of a *special* daughter, one he loved dearly, one Hitler might otherwise have ordered destroyed.

And because he loved her dearly —yet could not change her to fit the world in which she lived—he had created for her a world of her own, one in which she and her bird-like companions were not the exceptions but the norm.

I realized to my shame that Herr Kunstler loved this afflicted child more than I could ever love my own lovely little daughter. And so I could not arrest him.

And there are nights when I wake with a scream of terror on my lips as the pale horse and its pale rider, Death, gallop toward me, the scythe swinging like a pendulum to cut me down, and I see once again the rider's "face" before it disappears into nothingness—a bleached white skull with a cowlick of hair over one eyeless socket and a toothbrush mustache above its gaping mouth.

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a *NEW* Inspector Maigret story by

GEORGES SIMENON

first publication in the United States

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The first story in this new series presents the deceptively stolid Maigret with a favorite gambit of the genre—a train problem. There were six passengers in the compartment en route from Warsaw and Berlin to Paris. One was murdered, five were suspects. Simple? Well, not really; compact as the crime was in scene and dramatis personae, still it proved to be a web of crisscrossing clues and doublecrossing motives . . .

INSPECTOR MAIGRET DEDUCES

by GEORGES SIMENON

DIMLY THROUGH A DEEP SLEEP MAIGRET HEARD A RINGING SOUND, BUT HE was not aware that it was the telephone bell and that his wife was leaning over him to answer.

"It's Paulie," she said, shaking her husband. "He wants to speak to you."

"You, Paulie?" Maigret growled, half awake.

"Is that you, Nunk?" came from the other end of the wire.

It was three in the morning. The bed was warm but the windowpanes were covered with frost flowers, for it was freezing outside. It was freezing even harder up at Jeumont, from where Paulie was telephoning.

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"What's that you say? . . . Wait—I'll take the names . . . Otto . . . Yes, spell it, it's safer."

Madame Maigret, watching her husband, had only one question in her mind: whether he would have to get up or not. And, of course, he did, grumbling away. "Something very odd has happened," he explained, "over at Jeumont, and Paulie has taken it upon himself to detain an entire railway car."

Paulie was Maigret's nephew, Paul Vinchon, and he was a police inspector at the Belgian frontier.

"Where are you going?" Madame Maigret asked.

"First to Headquarters to get some information. Then I'll probably hop on the first train."

When anything happens it is always on the 106—a train that leaves Berlin at 11:00 a.m. with one or two cars from Warsaw, reaches Liége at 11:44 p.m., when the station is empty—it closes as soon as the train leaves—and finally gets to Erquelinnes at 1:57 in the morning.

That evening the car steps had been white with frost, and slippery. At Erquelinnes the Belgian customs officials, who had virtually nothing to do as the train was on its way out, passed down the corridors, looking into a compartment here and there, before hurrying back to the warmth of the station stove.

By 2:14 the train got under way again to cross the frontier, and reached Jeumont at 2:17.

"Jeumont!" came the cry of a porter running along the platform with a lamp. "Fifty-one minutes' wait!"

In most of the compartments the passengers were still asleep, the lights were dimmed and the curtains drawn.

"Second- and third-class passengers off the train for customs," echoed down the train.

And Inspector Paul Vinchon stood frowning at the number of curtains that were drawn back and at the number of lights turned up. He went up to the conductor. "Why are there so many traveling first-class today?"

"Some international convention of dentists that starts in Paris tomorrow. We have at least twenty-five of them as well as the ordinary passengers."

Vinchon walked into the car at the head of the train, opened the doors one after the other, growling out mechanically, "Have your passports ready, please."

Wherever the passengers had not wakened and the light was still dimmed, he turned it up; faces rose out of the shadows, swollen with fatigue.

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Five minutes later, on his way back up the corridor, he passed the customs men who were going through the first-class compartments, clearing the passengers into the corridor, while they examined the seats and searched every cranny.

"Passports, identity cards . . ."

He was in one of the red-upholstered German carriages. Usually these compartments held only four passengers, but because of the invasion of dentists this one had six.

Paulie threw an admiring glance at the pretty woman with the Austrian passport in the left corner seat by the corridor. The others he hardly looked at until he reached the far side of the compartment, where a man, covered with a thick rug, still had not moved.

"Passport," he said, touching him on the shoulder.

The other passengers were beginning to open their suitcases for the customs officials, who were now arriving. Vinchon shook his sleeping traveler harder; the man slid over on his side. A moment later Vinchon had ascertained he was dead.

The scene was chaotic. The compartment was too narrow for all the people who crowded in, and when a stretcher was brought in, there was some difficulty in placing the extremely heavy body on it.

"Take him to the first-aid post," Inspector Vinchon ordered. A little later he found a German doctor on the train.

At the same time he put a customs official on guard over the compartment. The young Austrian woman was the only one who wanted to leave the train to get some fresh air. When she was stopped, she gave a contemptuous shrug.

"Can you tell me what he died of?" Vinchon asked the doctor.

The doctor seemed puzzled; in the end, with Vinchon's help, he undressed the dead man. Even then there was no immediate sign of a wound; it took a full minute before the German pointed out, on the fleshy chest, a mark that could hardly be seen. "Someone stuck a needle in his heart," he said.

The train had still twelve or thirteen minutes before leaving again. The special Inspector was absent. Vinchon, feverish with excitement, had to make a snap decision: he ran to the stationmaster and gave orders for the murder car to be uncoupled.

The passengers were not sure what was happening. Those in the adjoining compartments protested when they were told that the car was staying at Jeumont and that they would have to find seats elsewhere. Those who had been traveling with the dead man protested even more when Vinchon told them he was obliged to keep them there till the next day.

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However, there was nothing else for it, seeing that there was a murderer among them. All the same, once the train had left, one car and six passengers short, Vinchon began to feel weak at the knees, and rang up his uncle, the famous Inspector Maigret.

At a quarter to four in the morning Maigret was at the Quai des Orfèvres; only a few lights were burning and he asked a sergeant on duty to make him some coffee. By four o'clock, with his office already clouded with pipe smoke, he had Berlin on the line, and was dictating to a German colleague the names and addresses his nephew had given him.

Afterward he asked for Vienna, as one of the passengers in the compartment came from there, and then he wrote out a telegram for Warsaw, for there had also been a lady from Vilna by the name of Irvitch.

Meanwhile, in his office at the station at Jeumont, Paul Vinchon was taking a firm line with his five suspects, whose reactions varied according to their temperaments. At least there was a good fire on—one of those large station stoves that swallows up bucket after bucket of coal. Vinchon had chairs brought in from the neighboring offices, and good old administrative seats they were, too, with turned legs and shabby velvet upholstery.

"I assure you I am doing everything possible to speed things up, but in the circumstances I have no choice but to detain you here."

He had not a minute to lose if he wanted to draw up anything like a suitable report for the morning. The passports were on his desk. The body of Otto Braun—the victim's name, according to the passport found in his pocket—was still at the first-aid post.

"I can, if you like, get you something to drink. But you will have to make up your minds quickly—the buffet is about to close."

At ten past four Vinchon was disturbed by a ring on the telephone. "Hello? Aulnoye? What's that? Of course. There's probably some connection, yes. Well, send him over by the first train. And the packet, too, of course."

Vinchon went into an adjoining office to put through another call to Maigret unheard.

"Is that you, Nunk? Something else, this time. A few minutes ago, as the train was drawing into the station at Aulnoye, a man was seen getting out from under a car. There was a bit of a chase, but they managed to get him in the end. He was carrying a waxed-paper packet of bearer bonds, mostly oil securities, for quite an amount. The man gave his name as Jef Bebelmans, native of Antwerp, and his profession as an acrobat . . . Yes . . . They're bringing him over on the first train. You'll be on that one, too? . . . No? . . . At 10:20? Thanks, Nunk."

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And he returned to his flock of sheep and goats, which is the way he thought of them . . .

When day broke, the frosty light made it seem even colder than the night before. Passengers for a local train started to arrive, and Vinchon worked on, deaf to the protests of the detained passengers, who eventually subsided, overwhelmed with fatigue.

No time was lost. This was essential, for it was the kind of business that could bring diplomatic complications. One could not go on indefinitely holding five travelers of different nationalities, all with their papers in order, just because a man had been killed in their railway compartment.

Maigret arrived at 10:20, as he had said he would. At 11:00, on a siding where the death car had been shunted, the reconstruction of the crime took place.

It was a little ghostly, with the gray light, the cold, and the general weariness. Twice a nervous laugh rang out, indicating that one of the lady passengers had helped herself too freely to the drinks to warm herself.

"First of all put the dead man back in his seat," Maigret ordered. "I suppose the curtains on the outside window were drawn?"

"Nothing's been touched," said his nephew.

Of course, it would have been better to wait until night, until the exact time of the affair. But as that was impossible—

Otto Braun, according to his passport, was 58, born at Bremen, and formerly a banker at Stuttgart. He certainly looked the part, neatly dressed, with his comfortable, heavy build and close-cropped hair.

The information that had just arrived from Berlin stated: *Had to stop his financial activities after the National Socialist revolution, but gave an undertaking of loyalty to the Government, and has never been disturbed. Said to be very rich. Contributed one million marks to party funds.*

In one of his pockets Maigret found a hotel bill from the Kaiserhof, in Berlin, where Otto Braun had stayed three days on his way from Stuttgart.

Meanwhile, the five passengers were standing in the corridor, watching, some dismally and others angrily, the comings and goings of Inspector Maigret. Pointing to the luggage rack above Braun, Maigret asked, "Are those his suitcases?"

"They're mine," came the sharp voice of Lena Leinbach, the Austrian.

"Will you please take the seat you had last night?"

She did so reluctantly, and her unsteady movements betrayed the effects of the drinks. She was beautifully dressed, and wore a mink coat, and a ring on every finger.

The report on her that was telegraphed from Vienna said: *Courtesan of*

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the luxury class, who has had numerous affaires in the capitals of Central Europe, but has never come to the attention of the police. Was for a long time the mistress of a German prince.

"Which of you got on at Berlin?" Maigret asked, turning to the others.

"If you will allow me," someone said in excellent French. And, in fact, it turned out to be a Frenchman, Adolphe Bonvoisin, from Lille.

"I can perhaps be of some help to you as I was on the train from Warsaw. There were two of us. I myself came from Lvov, where my firm—a textile concern—has a Polish subsidiary. Madame boarded the train at Warsaw at the same time as I did." He indicated a middle-aged woman in an astrakhan coat, dark and heavily built, with swollen legs.

"Madame Irvitch of Vilna?"

As she spoke no French, the interview was conducted in German. Madame Irvitch, the wife of a wholesale furrier, was coming to Paris to consult a specialist, and she wished to lodge a protest—

"Sit down in the place you were occupying last night."

Two passengers remained—two men.

"Name?" Maigret asked the first, a tall, thin, distinguished-looking man with an officer's bearing.

"Thomas Hauke, of Hamburg."

On Hauke, Berlin had had plenty to say: *Sentenced in 1924 to two years' imprisonment for dealing in stolen jewelry . . . closely watched since . . . frequents the pleasure spots of various European capitals . . . suspected of engaging in cocaine and morphine smuggling.*

Finally, the last one, a man of 35, bespectacled, shaven-headed, severe. "Dr. Gellhorn," he said, "from Brussels."

A silly misunderstanding then arose. Maigret asked him why, when his fellow passenger was discovered unconscious, he had done nothing about it.

"Because I'm not a doctor of medicine. I'm an archeologist."

By now the compartment was occupied as it had been the previous night:

Otto Braun	Adolphe Bonvoisin	Madame Irvitch
Thomas Hauke	Dr. Gellhorn	Lena Leinbach

Naturally, except for Otto Braun, henceforth incapable of giving evidence one way or another, each one protested entire innocence. And each one claimed to know nothing.

Maigret had already spent a quarter of an hour in another room with Jef

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Bebelmans, the acrobat from Antwerp who had appeared from under a car at Aulnoye carrying more than two million in bearer bonds. At first, when confronted with the corpse, Bebelmans had betrayed no emotion, merely asking, "Who is it?"

Then he had been found to be in possession of a third-class ticket from Berlin to Paris, although that had not prevented him from spending part of the journey hiding under a car, no doubt to avoid declaring his bonds at the frontier.

Bebelmans, however, was not a talkative fellow. His one observation revealed a touch of humor: "It's your business to ask questions. Unfortunately, I have absolutely nothing to tell you."

The information on him was not too helpful, either: *Formerly an acrobat, he has since been a night-club waiter in Heildelberg, and later in Berlin."*

"Well, now," Maigret began, puffing away at his pipe, "you, Bonvoisin, and Madame Irvitch were already in the train at Warsaw. Who got in at Berlin?"

"Madame was first," Bonvoisin said, indicating Lena Leinbach.

"And your suitcases, madame?"

She pointed to the rack above the dead man, where there were three luxurious crocodile bags, each in a fawn cover.

"So you put your luggage over this seat and sat down in the other corner, diagonally opposite."

"The dead man—I mean, that gentleman—came in next." Bonvoisin asked nothing better than to go on talking.

"Without luggage?"

"All he had with him was a traveling rug."

This was the cue for a consultation between Maigret and his nephew. Quickly they made another inventory of the dead man's wallet, in which a luggage slip was found. As the heavy baggage had by then reached Paris, Maigret sent telephone instructions that these pieces should be opened at once.

"Good! Now, this gentleman—" He motioned toward Hauke.

"He got in at Cologne."

"Is that right, Monsieur Hauke?"

"To be precise, I changed compartments at Cologne. I was in a non-smoker."

Dr. Gellhorn, too, had got on at Cologne. While Maigret, hands in pockets, was putting his questions, muttering away to himself, watching each of them in turn, Paul Vinchon, like a good secretary, was taking notes at a rapid rate.

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These notes read:

Bonvoisin: Until the German frontier, no one seemed to know anyone else, except for Madame Irvitch and myself. After the customs we all settled down to sleep as best we could, and the light was dimmed. At Liége I saw the lady opposite (Lena Leinbach) try to go out into the corridor. Immediately the gentleman in the other corner (Otto Braun) got up and asked her in German what she was doing. "I want a breath of air," she said. And I'm sure I heard him say, "Stay where you are."

Later in his statement Bonvoisin returned to this point:

At Namur she tried once more to get out of the train, but Otto Braun, who seemed to be asleep, suddenly moved, and she stayed where she was. At Charleroi they spoke to each other again, but I was falling asleep and have only a hazy recollection.

So, somewhere between Charleroi and Jeumont, in that hour and a half or so, one of the passengers must have made the fatal move, must have approached Otto Braun and plunged a needle into his heart.

Only Bonvoisin would not have needed to get up. He had only to move slightly to the right to reach the German. Hauke's position, directly opposite the victim, was the next best, then Dr. Gellhorn's and finally the two women's.

Despite the cold, Maigret's forehead was bathed with sweat. Lena Leinbach watched him furiously, while Madame Irvitch complained of rheumatism and consoled herself by talking Polish to Bonvoisin.

Thomas Hauke was the most dignified of them all, and the most aloof, while Gellhorn claimed that he was missing an important appointment at the Louvre.

To return to Vinchon's notes, the following dialogue appears:

Maigret, to Lena: Where were you living in Berlin?

Lena: I was only there for a week. I was staying as usual at the Kaiserhof.

M: Did you know Otto Braun?

L: No. I may have run across him in the hall or the lift.

M: Why, then, after the German frontier did he start talking to you as if he knew you?

L: (dryly) Perhaps because he grew bolder away from home.

M: Was that why he forbade you to get off the train at Liége and Namur?

L: He merely said I'd catch cold.

The questioning was still going on when there was a telephone call from Paris. Otto Braun's luggage—there were eight pieces—contained a great amount of clothing, and so much linen and personal stuff that one might have assumed the banker was going off on a long trip, if not forever. But no money—only four hundred marks in a wallet.

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As for the other passengers: Lena Leinbach was carrying 500 French francs, 50 marks, 30 crowns; Dr. Gelhorn, 700 marks; Thomas Hauke, 40 marks and 20 French francs; Madame Irvitch, 30 marks, 100 francs, and letters of credit on a Polish bank in Paris; Bonvoisin, 12 zloty, 10 marks, 5000 francs.

They still had to search the hand luggage that was in the compartment. Hauke's bag held only one change of clothes, a dinner jacket, and some underwear. In Bonvoisin's there were two marked decks of cards.

But the real find came in Lena Leinbach's suitcases in which, under the crystal-and-gold bottles, the fragile lingerie, and the gowns, there were beautifully contrived false bottoms.

But the false bottoms were empty. When questioned, all Lena Leinbach said was, "I bought these from a lady who went in for smuggling. They were a great bargain. *I've* never used them for anything like that."

Who had killed Otto Braun in the bluish half light of the compartment between Charleroi and Jeumont?

Paris was beginning to get worried. Maigret was summoned to the telephone. This business was going to cause a stir, and there would be complications. The numbers of the bonds found on Jef Bebelmans had been transmitted to the leading banks, and everything was in order—there was no record of any large theft of bonds.

It was eleven o'clock when they had started this laborious reconstruction in the railway car. It was two o'clock before they got out, and then only because Madame Irvitch fainted after declaring in Polish she could no longer bear the smell of the corpse.

Vinchon was pale, for it seemed to him that his uncle was not showing his usual composure—that he was, in fact, dithering.

"It's not going well, Nunk?" he said in a low voice as they were crossing the tracks.

Maigret's only response was to sigh, "I wish I could find the needle. Hold them all another hour."

"But Madame Irvitch is ill!"

"What's that to do with me?"

"Dr. Gellhorn claims—"

"Let him," Maigret cut him short.

And he went off to lunch on his own at the station bar.

"Be quiet, I tell you!" Maigret snapped, an hour later. His nephew lowered his head. "All you do is bring me trouble. I'm going to tell you my conclusions. After that, I warn you, you can get yourself out of this

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mess, and if you don't, you needn't bother to ring up your nunk. Nunk's had enough."

Then, changing his tone, he went on, "Now! I've been looking for the one logical explanation of all the facts. It's up to you to prove it, or to obtain a confession. Try to follow me.

"First, Otto Braun, with all his wealth, would not have come to France with eight suitcases and goodness knows how many suits—and, on the other hand, with precisely four hundred marks.

"Second, there must have been some reason for him to pretend during the German part of the journey not to know Lena Leinbach, and then as soon as they were over the Belgian border for them to be on familiar terms.

"Third, he refused to let her get out of the train at Liége, at Namur, and at Charleroi.

"Fourth, in spite of that she made several desperate attempts to get out.

"Fifth, a certain Jef Bebelmans, a passenger from Berlin who had never seen Braun—or he would have shown some sign on seeing the corpse—was found carrying more than two million in bonds."

And, still in a very bad temper, Maigret rumbled on, "Now I'll explain. Otto Braun, for reasons of his own, wanted to smuggle his fortune, or part of it, out of Germany. Knowing that his luggage would be minutely searched, he came to an agreement with a demimondaine in Berlin, and had double-bottomed suitcases made for her, knowing that they would stand less chance of being closely examined, being full of feminine articles.

"But Lena Leinbach, like all self-respecting members of her calling, has one real love: Thomas Hauke. Hauke, who is a specialist in this line, arranged with Lena in Berlin—perhaps even in the Kaiserhof—to make off with the bonds hidden in her suitcases.

"She gets on the train first, and puts the cases where Braun, still suspicious, has told her to put them. She sits down in the opposite corner, for they are not supposed to know each other.

"At Cologne, Hauke, to keep an eye on things, comes to take his place in the compartment. Meanwhile, another accomplice, Jef Bebelmans, probably a professional burglar, is traveling third-class with the bonds, and at each frontier he has orders to hide for a while underneath the car.

"Once the Belgian frontier is crossed, Otto Braun obviously runs no further risk. He could at any moment take it into his head to open his companion's suitcases and remove his bonds. That is why, first at Liége, then at Namur, and again at Charleroi, Lena Leinbach tries to get off the train.

"Is Braun mistrustful? Does he suspect something? Or is he just in love with her? Whichever it is, he watches Lena closely, and she begins to

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panic, for in Paris he will inevitably discover the theft, the empty false bottoms.

"He may even notice it at the French frontier where, having no further reason to hide the bonds, he may want to open the suitcases. Thomas Hauke, too, must be aware of the danger of discovery—"

"And it's he who kills Braun?" Vinchon asked.

"I'm certain it is not. If Hauke had got up to do that, one or another of his traveling companions would have noticed. In my opinion Braun was killed when you went past the first time, calling, 'Have your passports ready, please.'

"At that moment everyone got up, in the dark, still half asleep. Only Lena Leinbach had a reason to go over to Braun, press close to him to take down her suitcases, and I am convinced that it was at that moment—"

"But the needle?"

"Look for it!" Maigret grunted. "A long brooch pin will do. If this woman had not happened on someone like you, who insisted on undressing the corpse, for a long time it would have seemed to be a death from natural causes.

"Now draw up your plan. Make Lena think Bebelmans has talked, make Bebelmans think Hauke has been broken—all the old dodges, eh?"

And he went off to have a beer while Vinchon did what his uncle had told him. Old dodges are good dodges because they work. In this case they worked because Lena Leinbach was wearing a long arrow-shaped pin of brilliants in her hat, and because Paulie, as Madame Maigret called him, pointing at it, said to her, "You can't deny it. There's blood on the pin!"

It wasn't true. But, for all that, she had a fit of hysterics and made a full confession.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE PAPERBACKS

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Something new has come into the secret agent story. Have you noticed it too? . . . Perhaps this is the secret agent story to end all secret agent stories; if "The Hkzmp Gsv Bzmp Case" doesn't stop the trend in its tracks, perhaps nothing will. Nevertheless— a biting, satiric, funny, far-fetched, sad, glad, expert exposé of the whole incredible rigmarole and folderol . . .

THE HKZMP GSV BZMP CASE

by JAMES CROSS

Here's Your Chance to Write History

"*Communiqué* feels this country needs a rallying cry for the Viet-Nam war effort, and nobody, we suggest, could better fill this void than members of the overseas-oriented agencies of the government—that's us!

"So we invite your ideas . . .

"Maybe you can join the nameless army of sloganeers who have vitalized national emotions in time past and added dash and color to previous calls to arms, from Revolutionary times to the present . . .

"As a starter in the Viet-Nam competition, how about 'Roll 'em back to the 17th', or 'Kickin' the Cong Around.'

"Take it from here, dear members. All we ask is that you send your suggestions—as many as you like—to our offices at Room 2928 New State, before September 20. And be sure to include your Recreation Association membership number."

from COMMUNIQUÉ, published monthly by the Department of State—U.S. Information Agency Recreation Association, issue of September, 1965

OUR GAL ON THE MOVE—Go South for a Change

"Overworked? In a rut? Well, for fun, change and an instant tan in a relaxed atmosphere you can't beat the Recreation Association Miami-Nassau tour budget package of eight days.

"The next one is scheduled to leave Washington November 21 . . .

"The 23-hour train trip presents plenty of opportunity to get acquainted by seat hopping or exchanging reading matter and ideas.

"Once in Miami, you can sun bask and relax at a tropical hotel or don sailing clothes and head for the bongo-beating calypso island of Nassau."

from COMMUNIQUÉ, same issue

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"THE FOOLS," Sebastian Nonesuch spat out savagely, crumpling the offending paper in his hand, "the clumsy, meddling, purblind fools!"

"Steady on, old boy," Blenkinsop muttered around the stem of his shaggy old briar pipe, leaning forward to pick up the ball of paper that Nonesuch had hurled to the floor in his fury. "Mind if I have a dekko, old boy?" Blenkinsop went on, beginning to unfold the crumpled bulletin.

Nonesuch's stiffened right hand came forward automatically, unthinkingly, in the deadly karate chop which would sever the other man's hand at the wrist like a Vibro-Tru electric carving knife through salami. But at the last minute he remembered and held back. Good God, he thought, that was old Blenkinsop! We've been exchanging information for years; and it would have all been for nothing—all for a crumpled piece of paper that several thousand people have already seen. The strain's too much, Nonesuch thought; I need a vacation.

"I'm sorry, Blenkers," Nonesuch muttered inanely; "don't know what came over me."

His British opposite number from M.I.14 looked at him shrewdly and affectionately.

"You look a bit off the feed, old boy, what? Better have a spot of leave. Come back refreshened and keen as mustard, eh."

Nonesuch shook his head wearily.

"There's no time for that. It may be too late even now."

He pointed to the paper lying still unread in Blenkinsop's hand.

"Read it," he said hoarsely, "just read it. I'd like five minutes alone in here with whoever wrote it."

Blenkinsop read the paper deliberately and efficiently, his lips moving as he absorbed the information and his index finger sliding along remorselessly from line to line. (Good sound chap, Nonesuch thought, none better in a tight hole, but why are they so damn backward in M.I.14? Why don't they set up a rapid course the way the Agency has?)

Blenkinsop raised his head and whistled slowly.

"Damn bad show; don't blame you for being upset, old boy."

"You see it, Blenkers?"

"Only too well. What happens when *Communiqué* prints some of the winning slogans? It's a wide open publication; can't prevent the enemy from seeing it. Washington's full of spies. Send the slogans back home and brain-wash their own people, eh. And there goes the element of surprise."

"It's worse than that, Blenkers. These are rallying cries that can vitalize national emotions and add dash and color to our call to arms. What's to prevent the Enemy from getting hold of the best, and *turning them around and using them against us?*"

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"Nothing at all, old boy. Old Cong's a clever dog and"—he glanced again at the paper—"something like this. Look here, 'Kickin' the Cong around'—damned ingenious, might make all the difference in a tight spot in the jungle. Well, old John Cong's no fool, and he's going to have time to think and develop something pretty dreadful of his own, Geneva Convention or no Geneva Convention. What was that slogan you chaps had in World War II, Oh, yes, 'Slap the Jap'—deuced ingenious.

"Something like that, perhaps," he went on, lowering his voice, "like 'Spank the Yank!' "

"Those devils," Nonesuch said, "those vicious devils; but not even they—"

"They would indeed, old boy. You can count on it."

Nonesuch sat at his desk despondently, head in hands.

"Spank the Yank," he repeated to himself softly. It might be that indescribable something that made the difference between victory and defeat.

"Blenkers," he said brokenly, "on your life, never breathe a word of what you said."

"What do you think I am, old boy? Mum's the word—no names, no packdrill, what?"

He paused and drew himself up to his lanky, stooped six foot five. Then he brushed nervously at his drooping, flaxen mustache and screwed his monocle a little tighter into his right eye, which somehow was suddenly abrim with something —tears, perhaps?

"But I wish to God," Blenkinsop said brokenly, "that I'd never thought of the damn slogan. We're not ready for it yet, none of us; we're still children."

"It's all right, Blenkers. How could you know?"

"Well, now you know too, Sebastian."

He straightened his shoulders, and smiled.

"Well, I'm off, old boy. If there's anything M.I.14 can do. This thing's a little big, even for your Agency."

At the door he paused a minute, smiling oddly. Much later Sebastian Nonesuch was to curse himself and the selfish concentration on his own problems that made him miss the significance of that odd smile.

"You know the old saying," Blenkinsop said quietly. " 'Two men can keep a secret, if one be dead.' "

Then the door closed behind him.

Sebastian Nonesuch sat for five minutes staring at the wall. Then he smoothed out the piece of paper carefully and put it in the wall safe. He checked the safe and reached behind the door to turn on the photo-electric beam that would activate the thermite bomb. He adjusted the lasers across the doors and windows, sliding the beam across the door down to knee level.

Then he went into the parking lot and pulled the palm branches and

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leaves and the camouflage tarpaulin off the red SL Mercedes convertible, and drove into town. At Rive Gauche he ordered lavishly but carefully, eschewing all carbohydrates. By the time he was sniffing gently at the second armagnac with his *café filtre*, he felt almost happy.

"The director will be ready for you in a few minutes, Mr. Nonesuch," Miss Mifflin said, smiling dazzlingly at him.

Nonesuch looked at the smooth, beautifully lacquered face, with the pouting red lips and the cornflower-blue, wide, disingenuous eyes. Some day, he thought, some day someone is going to crack that lacquer, and bite that lower lip and black one of those big bright eyes; and if I don't do it myself, I want to be around to see it done.

Miss Mifflin stared at him levelly. I wonder how it would be with him, she thought. He's kind of plump, no matter how much he goes on about getting off the carbohydrate kick; and he's kind of ugly; and he's not too bright, really, and aways getting excited—he probably wouldn't have anything left after a day's work. But he gets to travel all the time—maybe he'd take me along; and they say he's killed eight men. If he'd just stop talking and grab some time—wow!

She raised her hands to make minute adjustments to her elaborate coiffeur, patting at the ash-blonde hair. Nonesuch watched her cynically, but unable to avoid noticing the way the gesture tightened the pectorals and threw upward and outward her remarkable breasts. When Miss Mifflin felt he had been given a long enough treatment, she went over to the bookshelf, stepping slowly to the top of a three-rung ladder in order to reach the top shelf, each motion drawing her short, tight skirt taut over her round buttocks, each step lifting the skirt higher up her thighs, exposing the long slim legs in the black, patterned nylons.

After a while she descended with a book, went back to her desk, and sat down, crossing her legs.

"Oh, Mr. Nonesuch."

"Huh."

"I have a friend, she works for the U.S. Information Agency. Their Recreation Association is having a contest. To invent a slogan, like, for winning the war in Vietnam. The winner gets to be named Miss Psychological Warfare and she gets a free trip to Miami and Nassau. Some of us girls here, we thought we'd enter it too, if they'd let us. Do you think you could talk with someone in USIA or State and find out if we girls could get in the contest?"

Nonesuch looked at her slowly and levelly, from under hooded eyes. Why, he looks just like a cobra or something, Miss Mifflin thought, shivering deliciously, but not forgetting to shiver in such a way as to

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let her off-the-shoulder white silk blouse slide down a few inches.

"Miss Mifflin," Nonesuch said levelly, "Miss Mifflin—"

"Andrea," she said, breathing faster.

"Miss Mifflin," Nonesuch went on, "where did you learn about this contest?"

"I told you—from my girl friend at USIA. It was in that *Communiqué* magazine. Jeepers, everyone knows about it. Why?—don't you think it was a good idea . . . Sebastian?"

Nonesuch came over to her quickly and took her chin in his hand, forcing it up to make her look at him. Miss Mifflin could feel the long delicate fingers moving slowly toward her throat, tickling her gently at first, then holding her so she could barely move. Oh, my God, Miss Mifflin thought, he's a kook, the way they all get after a while; but then the shivering and tingling in her throat were running down her body, warming her breasts and thighs, and she didn't care any more. Anyone coming in from outside would have to pass the guard who would phone her first, and the Director still had nearly an hour to go on his post-luncheon nap, and the big leather couch across the room, even if she would get a row of button marks down her back—

She squirmed forward, rubbing against him.

"Listen, baby," Nonesuch said, "if you know what's good for you, you'll button your lip about that slogan jazz."

Oh, my God, Miss Mifflin thought, almost fainting with excitement, just like Humphrey Bogart—or Sean Connery. Nonesuch slowly removed his hand from her chin and throat. She closed her eyes and waited for it to reappear somewhere else. But nothing happened and after a minute she opened her eyes, only to see that Nonesuch was sitting on the couch skimming through a copy of *Reader's Digest*.

"I won't say anything, Sebastian," she said, half haughtily, half pleadingly.

"Okay, baby, just so you get the message—keep your lip well buttoned."

Andrea Mifflin muttered under her breath, but Nonesuch had gone back to *Reader's Digest*.

Nonesuch skimmed through uplifting accounts of telepathy, animal heroism, and a first-person story titled *I'm Glad They Cut My Head Off*. Suddenly his eye was caught by a story revealing a method by which a man could eat like Lucullus, guzzle booze like the hero of *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, and still lose weight—by the simple method of avoiding carbohydrates.

Loose lips, he thought; the almighty dollar; was there nothing the American press wouldn't do to jack up circulation? Who was this man Alsop, and how had he obtained the X-Force's secret method?—the

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secret that for ten years had enabled its men to lull Soviet suspicion by matching them mouthful for mouthful and toasting them under the table, and still keep trim and fit for hand-to-hand combat. And now it was being given to millions of blabber-mouthed Americans, and—he glanced at the magazine and noted it was months old—by now it was being read in translation all over the world. Spilt milk, he thought; no use crying; but all the more reason to step hard on this slogan business. Don't be a sucker twice.

The buzzer on Miss Mifflin's desk woke him from his reverie, and a moment later he was sitting in a comfortable leather armchair facing his Chief, the man they called X.

"Well, Sebastian," X said cheerfully, "this is a hell of a mess and no mistake."

"You've seen the issue of *Communiqué*, X?"

"Who the hell hasn't by now? But we've stepped on that hard. The contest is off for good. We've closed down the magazine until further notice. We've got a team on duty around the clock in 2928 New State to pick up all the contest entries and turn them over to Phychological Warfare. We've got fifty men scattered around the post offices to pick up the entries and deliver them to the team—there were a few entries on post cards and a couple of postmen read them, so we had to take them into protective custody till this blows over. All the contestants will get a personal visit and a warning to keep quiet. There may be some holes, but I think we've got it choked off."

He shook his graying head wearily.

"Like a leak in the levee," he said; "you plug up one hole and the water comes out somewhere else. If the American people only knew . . ."

"There's one thing you don't know, X," Nonesuch said slowly. "There is a slogan—well, I won't mention it, I wish I'd never heard—but it could be the psychological equivalent of all-out nuclear war for the Other Side. It's devilish, but it could provide a rallying cry and vitalize national emotions, just like it says in the magazine."

"For us, Nonesuch?"

"No, X—for them . . . but I think it's safe, Chief," he went on. "Only two people know the slogan—myself and the man who thought it up, half jokingly; and he won't talk."

"Who was it?"

"Old Blenkers from M.I.14. He's safe. He's more worried than I am, if that could be possible. The last thing he said yesterday was, 'Two men can keep a secret, if one of them be dead.' "

Now X was looking at him sharply, lines of pain etching his worn face.

"Blenkinsop," he said. "Sebastian, you haven't heard? Blenkinsop was found dead this morning. A suicide."

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"Good God, Old Blenkers . . . He didn't want to know the deadly slogan and he couldn't forget it because he invented it himself. He was afraid that some day he would talk unwittingly, so he took good care that he never would. That's what he meant by his last words."

X went over to the portable bar and produced a bottle of champagne, Mumm 1953, extra-dry. He took two glasses from the cabinet above and twirled them a few times in a bucket of shaved ice. He opened the champagne with swift dexterity, filled a glass, handed it to Nonesuch, then filled his own.

"I'm afraid there's no fireplace," X said, "but the wall will do—over there by the Picasso."

Then he raised his glass and looked at Nonesuch. There was a suspicious glittering in his eyes and he gulped before he could speak.

"To Blenkinsop," he said, "a straight arrow if there ever was one."

"To Blenkinsop," Nonesuch replied, "in his own language—a pukka sahib."

They drained their glasses and hurled them against the wall, watching the thin crystal almost explode and fall onto the forty-foot Bokhara rug.

"A hell of a note for the cleaning woman," X said gruffly, covering up his emotion. "Well, that's about it, Nonesuch. We've stopped up that rathole. About the slogan now. Do you remember it? I'm just wondering if there's any way it could be turned around and used against the enemy."

Spank the Yank, Nonesuch thought, shuddering inwardly as he pictured the savage hordes pour out of ambush, screaming the devilish slogan that poor old Blenkinsop had created.

"I took no chances. It's in my head, but it's also in my safe, written down on the page from *Communiqué* that told of the contest."

"Do you think that's quite secure, Sebastian?"

"It's encoded," Nonesuch replied. He lowered his voice. "The new one, the one where you turn the alphabet about so that A equals Z and so on. It's unbreakable."

"No cipher is unbreakable, given enough time and intelligence," X said severely. "Surely you remember your indoctrination." He paused. "I'm not very pleased with you, Sebastian."

"It's all right, X," Nonesuch said soothingly. "The lasers and the photoelectric beams are set—knee-high. But if it would make you feel better, I'll go over and destroy it."

He had started for the door when he heard the buzzer on the Chief's desk. He turned back to look, and X waved an impatient hand at him, telling him to remain.

"You're certain," X said slowly, face white and drawn. "There's no chance of a mistake? When did you find out? Just now? All right, close off the wing."

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He turned to Sebastian.

"Mr. Nonesuch," he said with mocking savagery. "Mr. Nonesuch, when were you last in your office?"

"Last night, when I set the beams. I was on a case this morning and when I came back I went straight to your office."

"Whatever case it was," X said, "you're off it now."

"What is it?"

"Sometime between last night and the present your office was burgled, your safe was opened, and without even looking I can tell you what's missing."

"The slogan. But they couldn't get in. All the beams were set, knee-high. Only a midget or a baby could have got under them, and anyone like that would surely have been noticed by the guards."

"Go and check right away," X said, and then with an acerbity foreign to his nature he added an obscene accusation.

When Nonesuch returned, X was just hanging up the phone.

"Well?"

"You were right. They took the slogan and nothing else. But the beams were undisturbed—the whole thing's impossible!"

"Nothing that happens is impossible," X replied sententiously. "Well, I've stopped the leaks for the time being. The testimony of the guards now makes it clear that the theft took place only a short time ago. We've put a cordon around the District of Columbia, set up portable hospital units, and no one's leaving the District without being stripped to the skin. If they squawk, we'll tell them it's a diseased fruit and vegetable inspection, the way it is on the California-Mexico border."

"There's only one catch," X went on. "We can't keep it up forever. Sooner or later we've got to let someone through. And my idea is that we deliberately build an escape hole and watch it; we'll see what rat tries to crawl out."

X glanced at the issue of *Communiqué* on his desk.

"You, Sebastian, are going to transfer to State and join the Welfare and Recreation Association. And the first thing you're going to do is to sign up for that Miami-Nassau tour budget package that leaves Washington on November 21. I'll pass the word to them not to cancel that tour, and on November 21 we'll lift the curtain for a moment and see who tries to crawl through."

"Thanks, X," Sebastian said quietly. "Especially after I let you down."

"It's all right, boy; no one's perfect. But Gung-ho it this time. You know our motto—'Shape up or ship out.' 'On the ball or off the boat.' They're not just words, they mean something."

Nonesuch looked around him at the passengers on the cruise ship to Nassau. There were not very many

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of them, perhaps two dozen. There had been a lot of cancellations, and though the Recreation Association had assured its members that the trip was on, most of the quondam holiday-seekers had felt the icy hand of fear touch them and had not reinstated their reservations.

Those who had come on the train were a mixed lot. The women wore an assortment of costumes. The men from the State Department, like the disguised Nonesuch, had been wearing their uniforms of striped trousers and cutaway coat, with black or maroon ascots depending on their rank. Most had bowlers on their heads, though a few of the older men had clung to high silk hats. In contrast, their colleagues from the Information Agency, many of them ex-journalists, were neatly attired in sports jackets, gray flannel slacks, and either black or brown loafers. Again, discrepancy in rank was gently hinted at by the variation in collar style, rounded or pointed button-down white shirts.

Remembering the article describing the trip, Nonesuch had tried desperately to get acquainted with the group on the train. He had seat-hopped and ended up next to a dignified, baldheaded diplomat.

"Nice day," Nonesuch said carefully.

The State Department man looked up coldly from last week's copy of the London *Economist*.

"It is not day, but night," he said. "It is not at all nice—in fact, it is raining quite hard, as you will observe if you look out the window. Otherwise your remark is technically correct."

Nonesuch slunk off as the diplomat returned to his *Economist*.

On his next attempt at getting acquainted he had armed himself with a copy of *Playboy*, opened it to the most luscious picture-spread, and walked over to a young man holding *Reader's Digest* in his lap.

"Wonder if you'd care to swap mags," Nonesuch said genially. "I've finished mine."

The young man peered at Nonesuch myopically for a moment, then he reached into his inside breast pocket and outfitted himself with a huge pair of horn-rimmed glasses that looked like the sawed-off bottoms of milk bottles framed in miniature automobile tires. He stared severely at the magazine that Nonesuch was extending to him.

"Brother," he said after a moment, "are you a professor?"

"Well, no," Nonesuch said, "as a matter of fact I was a major in Business Administration as an undergraduate; but I've never taught."

"I don't mean that, brother," the young man said severely, "I mean do you profess to be a true believer and will you turn aside from evil ways? Take your devil's handbook away and do not waste your time on me."

"You sure you're on the right train?" Nonesuch asked nervously.

"Like it says in the Good Book,

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brother," the young man said firmly, " 'And when the Gospel Train pulls out, and God says, "All Aboard," will you be riding in the Pullman, brother, will you be up front with the Lord?' "

"You're part of the tour?" Nonesuch asked nervously. "That is—"

"That's right, brother. Until a few weeks ago, I was with the Three-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinatarians, spreading the good seed, brother, spreading the good seed. But God moves in a mysterious way his wonders to perform, and a Great and Good Man summoned me to Washington so that, working through weak human agencies, I could spread the seed worldwide. So take that devil's book away, brother, take it away."

Nonesuch fled blindly into the Club Car. There was only one technique left to him—exchanging ideas. He took a seat across from a red-faced genial man in mufti, ordered a double scotch and water, and bided his time. He drained his drink and called for the waiter, gave his order for a refill, and turned to the red-faced man.

"Have one on me, friend," he said.

"Nossir, buddy," the red-faced man said firmly. "Put your money away; it's no good here. Nobody buys a drink for Jim O'Toole until *he's* bought one first. Here, waiter, fill 'em up for me and my friend."

"All right," Nonesuch said, "but the next is mine."

"Done and done. What's your name, buddy-boy?"

"Sebastian Nonesuch."

"Nonesuch, I like the cut of your jib. Drink hearty."

When both had downed half of the fresh drinks, Nonesuch remembered the last suggestion in *Communiqué*—to exchange ideas.

"Funny thing," Sebastian said, "they say the African elephant can't be trained. Yet Hannibal, from North Africa, brought war elephants against Rome. I wonder how. Perhaps it's a lost art."

"Elephants," O'Toole said, "Republican symbol. My old man told me when I was a kid on his knee, 'Jim boy, whatever you do, don't vote Republican.' I never did, and look at me now."

"On the other hand," Nonesuch went on, "Polybius tells us that the Seleucids had a stud farm for breeding Indian elephants at Apamea; and the Ptolemies had a place in Egypt called Argus-of-the-Beasts where they raised elephants. Maybe Hannibal brought them from there. What's your feeling, Jim?"

Suddenly O'Toole's head fell flat on the table in front of him. Nonesuch waited for a few minutes. Then he moved to the other end of the Club Car.

For the first time on the train he saw a familiar face.

"Andy, baby," he said warmly, "where ya been, kid? Long time, no see."

"Good evening, Mr. Nonesuch,"

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Andrea Mifflin said coldly, rising from her chair and leaving the Club Car.

But now on the cruise ship it was different. The State and USIA employees had abandoned their uniforms and were dressed in an abandoned collection of vacation clothes. An Undersecretary in tattered T-shirt and dungarees was chatting animatedly against the rail with a buxom young lady in skin-tight shorts surmounted by an off-the-shoulder blouse that kept slipping down to where only her prominent breasts held it up. The USIA ex-preacher, in tennis shorts, was engaging in a spirited game of ping-pong with a young lady in a bikini. There was a general air of laxity and abandon.

By now Nonesuch had sized up all the passengers. They were all relatively short, with one exception, and just conceivably capable of passing with difficulty under the low-set laser beams and photo-electric cells in his office. The exception was a six foot five junior executive, at the moment engaged in a spirited game of deck tennis with a lush five-foot blonde. Twenty-eight people, Nonesuch thought despairingly, twenty-seven not counting Andrea Mifflin; and I've only been able to eliminate one so far—the six-footer. Maybe I should cultivate him; I'm going to need help.

For a minute he thought of the deadly slogan, "Spank the Yank." In its foolproof cipher, it would mean nothing to the person who carried it—"Hkzmp Gsv Bzmp." But once they got it to Moscow or Peking it was just a matter of time.

When he saw Andrea Mifflin again, he walked up to her resolutely.

"I need your help," he said simply.

She looked at him accusingly but it was the Agency call for succor, and she could not refuse it.

"All right," she said, "what can I do?"

"It's not working. There are twenty-seven suspects, and so far I've eliminated only one—that tall drink of water over there."

"Oh, you mean Dr. Snodgrass. He's a real dreamboat."

"I'm glad you think so," Nonesuch said testily, "but you've got to help me eliminate the others. We'll be in Nassau in the morning."

"All right, I'll do anything I can."

But when they got together in Nassau the next evening, there were still twenty-six suspects, and Andrea had accomplished nothing.

"You don't need to be so unpleasant," she said querulously, as they sat together at a table in Filthy Fred's bar, listening to the maddening sounds of steel drums, just as *Communiqué* had told them it would be.

"To hell with it," Nonesuch said, "let's dance."

In a moment he had swept her into his arms and onto the dance

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floor, feeling the tropic rhythms tear at his very vitals, feeling the sleek blonde head tuck itself into his collarbone, feeling the long lithe torso glue itself to his body.

"Sebastian, baby," she said, blowing softly into his ear, "why did we waste all this time?"

"We've got all night," Nonesuch said, "and there's my *cabaña*."

"All night, baby; but right now I'm hungry."

When they returned to the table she ordered *crêpes suzettes*. For a moment Sebastian Nonesuch felt an uncontrollable shiver of disgust run through him as he thought of the carbohydrate count; but his head was light and nothing seemed to matter any more, and after a moment he recklessly told the waiter to double the order.

And yet, somewhere deep down, despite the tumescence and the uncontrollable longing, he knew that it was wrong and obscene. But the Rum Surprise—"only seven to a customer"—ran hot in his veins, and he reached under the table and squeezed Andrea Mifflin's nylon-clad knee.

"Baby," she said breathlessly, "when you move, you move fast."

The next moment colored lights flashed on the dance floor, and the dancers went slowly back to their tables. A waiter set up two stands, like sawed-off high-jump holders, and placed a bamboo pole on top, about six feet above the floor.

"It's the Limbo," Andrea Mifflin said, "a dance originally performed by slaves to gain their freedom. I read about it in *Communiqué*. Come on, let's try it—don't be chicken. It's part of the fun of the Recreation Association cruise."

Nonesuch let her drag him unwillingly to his feet. It was almost with a sense of relief that he knocked off the bar at four feet, and saw Andrea, despite her lithe grace, eliminated two inches lower. By the time they had returned to the table, there was only one contestant left, the six-foot-five junior executive whom Nonesuch had observed earlier.

"He's very good," Nonesuch said. "Who did you say he is?"

"Oh, that's Orville Snodgrass. He's an administrative officer with the Alliance for Progress. Real cute, isn't he?"

Nonesuch pushed aside the wave of jealousy that swept through him.

"He's very agile; but let's see how he can do when they lower the bar even more."

"Oh, Orville's a real champ. He can get under at three feet, just about knee-high."

Knee-high, Nonesuch thought, suddenly remembering the carefully set laser beams in his office and the photoelectric cell, both set at knee-high; and yet someone had got under them. Not a midget or a baby but a grown man.

He watched Snodgrass through narrowed eyes. The man had bent himself backward like a jackknife

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sliding with ease under the bamboo pole. Finally, at two and a half feet, his writhing torso knocked the pole from its moorings. There was a frenzied burst of appaluse and Snodgrass bowed modestly.

"What a man," Andrea Mifflin breathed ecstatically.

"Precisely," Nonesuch said. "And now I think it's time for us to leave."

"But I haven't got my *crêpes suzettes*."

"You can have them warmed for breakfast," Nonesuch said masterfully, taking her arm in his, hearing the voice inside him say "No more carbohydrates," feeling the blood pulsing in his veins.

It was a long time later when the gray false dawn of the Caribbean swept through the *cabaña* and Sebastian Nonesuch slid carefully from the narrow cot and reached for his clothes, dressing quickly and efficiently. He was just buckling on his shoulder holster when Andrea awakened.

"Don't go," she said, still rosy with love and drugged with sleep, "Don't go."

"I have to. I'll be right back.

He had spotted Snodgrass' cottage on his way out the night before and it took him only three minutes, moving silently on bare feet, to reach it and gently open the door. For a moment he squatted on the floor, his automatic drawn, waiting for the man to awake.

When Snodgrass awoke it was like a machine. First his eyes opened automatically, then he reached under the pillow for the revolver that Nonesuch had removed. Then he sat up in bed, despair written on his face.

For a moment he tried to bluff.

"What the hell is this?"

"It's the end of the line, Snodgrass. Don't let's waste time."

"You're crazy."

"Just one thing, Snodgrass. 'Hkzmp Gsv Bzmp'—does that mean anything to you, Snodgrass?" Nonesuch enunciated perfectly, watching the fear crawl over the man's face.

"You can't prove it."

"Just give me the paper, Snodgrass," Sebastian said slowly. "Right now, and I'll make it easy for you."

After a moment Snodgrass pulled at his bushy head of hair and removed the cleverly designed wig. He reached into it and pulled out the missing front page of *Communiqué* complete with Nonesuch's encoded notation.

"I couldn't help it," Snodgrass said brokenly. "They bought up my debts. The mortgage, the Rolls-Royce payments, the Country Club dues, my wife's analyst, the kid's lessons—music and ballet and tennis and golf and the courses in philosophy and literature and painting. It was too much. I had to keep up and the money wasn't there."

Sebastian Nonesuch, the peerless secret agent, looked at him coldly.

"That's not my problem," he

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said, "but we don't want any scandal. I'll make it easy for you."

He broke open Snodgrass' revolver and extracted six of the seven bullets. Then he tossed the gun to the quavering wretch, covering him carefully with his own automatic.

"One bullet," he said. "Even a bungler like you shouldn't miss at six inches. You've got exactly thirty seconds."

Nonesuch was only a few feet out of the door when he heard the sharp report of the single shot. He went back and peered through the door for a moment. He walked into the room and turned Snodgrass over on his back. He lifted the drooping eyelids until he was satisfied, then he went back to his *cabaña*.

Andrea was still half awake, warm and sleepy, as he slipped back into bed. Voluptuously she turned to him and wrapped her arms around him.

"So long," she said, "you were gone so long—" and she bit his ear.

"Two minutes, baby," Nonesuch said, "two minutes—and don't you forget it if you want to keep your job."

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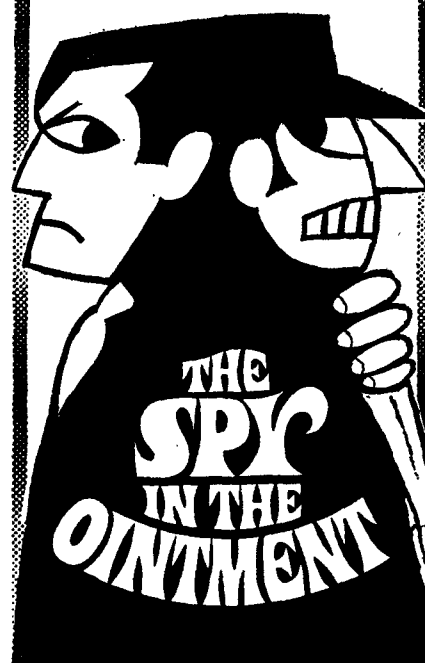

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

You are probably as tired of spy novels as I am; but even if the regular practitioners often leave you cold, you should still look into three more than "promising" first novels of espionage and other international intrigues: John Murphy's THE GUNRUNNERS (Macmillan, $5.95), Ross Thomas' THE COLD WAR SWAP (Morrow, $3.95) and Martin Waddel's OTLEY (Stein & Day, $3.95). Murphy excels at the long, slow, cumulatively powerful story; Thomas is harsh, violent, ironic; and Waddell is as daft as he is deft, with a cockeyed sense of humor and a fine feeling for ambivalence. All three are naturally gifted writers and (thank God!) unconventional individuals; they do much to brighten the season.

★★★★★ **WHY DID THEY KILL?** ***by John Bartlow Martin*** (Bantam H3258, 60¢)

Overdue revival of a 1953 classic of true crime (on a pointless killing by teenagers in Ann Arbor, 1951), antedating and surpassing IN COLD BLOOD as a penetrating humane, significant and artistically creative study in the meaning of murder.

★★★★ **BLIND SPOT,** ***by Joseph Harrington*** (Lippincott, $3.95)

At least as good as 1965's THE LAST KNOWN ADDRESS; Harrington's novels of Lieutenant Kerrigan (Manhattan D. A.'s office) are moving fast to the top of the American police-procedural school.

★★★★ **THE CRIMSON MADNESS OF LITTLE DOOM,** ***by Mark McShane*** (Crime Club, $3.50)

As provocative and outrageous as its title—a mad blend of farce, grue, acute characterization and superlative deceptive plotting.

★★★ **THE COOL COTTONTAIL,** ***by John Ball*** (Harper & Row, $4.50)

Last year's first-novel Edgar-winner returns worthily, with an odd case in which detective Virgil Tibbs, who is black, learns that whites too may be discriminated against because of their skin—if they insist (as devout nudists) on displaying it.

You are doubtless also more than a little tired of feminine-gothic romances; and again new names may freshen your outlook. Mary Paradise (well, a

(Continued on next page)

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new name, but an old pro) tells of modern Spain in THE MARRIAGE CHEST (Coward-McCann, $4.50); Janet Caird sets IN A GLASS DARKLY (Morrow, $3.95) in today's Scotland. Both girls display the lively spirit and disarming charm that keep us reading Victoria Holt and Mary Stewart; and Miss Caird has some special fun with a camera obscura and an unspeakably Victorian sculptor.

★★★ **DEATH OF A DOXY, by Rex Stout** (Viking, $3.75)

In his eightieth year, Stout (and Wolfe and Goodwin) continue to give lessons in professionalism to all rash younger contenders.

★★★ **PURE POISON, by Hillary Waugh** (Crime Club, $3.50)

One of the firmest of the solid, painstaking procedural cases of Police Chief Fred C. Fellows (Stockford, Conn.).

★★★ **MURDER ROUNDABOUT, by Richard Lockridge** (Lippincott, $3.95)

Predictably good murder puzzle and sketch of suburban life, plus (as usual) charming glimpses of the domesticity of Captain Merton L. Heimrich, NYSP.

★★★ **JOHNNY LOST, by Philip Jones** (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, $3.95)

Quest for a strayed three-year-old makes for powerful suspense and a vivid picture of the contemporary Australian frontier.

★★★ **DRUM BEAT—MADRID, by Stephen Marlowe** (Gold Medal d1686, 50¢)

No spies, but fine international financial chicanery combines with sex and violence for a colorful entry in the casebook of world-beat private eye Chet Drum.

★★★ **THE FOX VALLEY MURDERS, by John Holbrook Vance** (Bobbs-Merrill, $3.95)

Likeable start of a new American regional series, about the detectival and political career of Sheriff Joe Bain, in California's fictional but meticulously created San Rodrigo County.

Every year I try to assemble what I think are, of the current crop, the most interesting short stories of suspense, which appear this year as BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR: 21ST ANNUAL COLLECTION (Dutton, $4.50). And every year some of the stories I regard as "best" appear instead (as is right and just) in the Queen annual, which this year is ELLERY QUEEN'S CRIME CAROUSEL (New American Library, $5.50). Well . . . a sawbuck for the two books, and you'll have 38 stories (from the magazine year 1965) with which, I trust, you can't go wrong.

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Julien Laurent had the tastes of a connoisseur and the income (in his own eyes) of a beggar. Moreover, he had no training for anything except the sheer enjoyment of living—the best of everything in wine, women, and wickedness. So when his mistress (one of them) made that shocking suggestion . . .

A very Gallic story—sophisticated, ironic, and profoundly naughty . . .

PAULINE OR DENISE?

by VINCENT McCONNOR

"You must kill one of your sisters." Angelique's viridian eyes had observed his startled reaction as she raised her glass and tilted the tawny cognac between exquisite lips.

"I do not find that amusing," he had said.

Her words, in fact, had spoiled his entire evening. They had distracted him through a superb performance of "Don Giovanni," his favorite opera, and had ruined their midnight supper with American friends in Montparnasse.

Julien had continued to be preoccupied, as he drove Angelique home to her apartment on the Ile St. Louis. He did not go upstairs and his usually passionate parting kiss was, for once, perfunctory.

"You are not angry?" she asked. "Because of what I said?"

"Certainly not. Surprised that you would say such a thing—but not angry."

Her words continued to goad as his Citroën sped over the bridge and across the other island. "You must kill one of your sisters." He realized, with amusement, that he was driving past the huge stone edifice occupied by the Préfecture de Police. What would happen if he called out to those uniformed guards at the entrance? "My mistress says I should kill one of my sisters!" They would only think he was intoxicated.

Actually he was cold sober. Nothing he had drunk had been strong enough to warm his icy fingers or wipe Angelique's words from his mind.

He swerved right onto the Pont Neuf and turned down the deserted Rue de Rivoli, heading home, past the lights of the Tuileries flashing through the spring-leafed trees.

After a perfect dinner at Drouant's he had complained to Angelique about his unceasing need for money. "Never enough for anything! The small luxuries which

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make life bearable—I can afford none of them."

Angelique had only shrugged her exquisite shoulders under her new Chanel gown.

"It's bad enough the first of every month when I receive my check but before the middle of the month—I am destitute!"

She continued to sip her cognac without comment.

"I have the tastes of a connoisseur and the income for nothing. I can never afford an apartment of my own but, year after year, must live with my sisters in the miserable mansion built by our great-grandfather—"

"Such a charming place!"

"Not if you have to live in it, chérie. With only two servants when half a dozen are necessary. The rooms are drafty and the furniture is falling apart."

"Couldn't you get away from Paris for a holiday? I was hoping, this year, we might spend a month in Portugal—"

"Impossible!"

"Why, Julien? Why is it impossible?"

"Unless friends invited us to their villa I could not afford it. We should have to travel by train, which I detets, because my poor old car would never survive a long trip. When I drove you out to Malmaison last month, to see Tante Agnes, it took me three days to repair it."

"Looking at you, half of Paris envies your way of life."

"And the other half pursues me for my debts."

There was a long moment of silence before Angelique spoke again. "What about some sort of job? Your friend Henri Courton is doing something in aviation. Nobody seems to know what it is but he's getting paid."

"I am one of those unfortunates who has no training for anything but the enjoyment of life. What could I do in aviation?"

She shrugged again. "Bébé Morreau is manager—or something—of a charming shop on the Rue de la Paix. He's very successful—"

"Can you imagine me in a shop?"

"No. I'm afraid I can't . . . Where are we going tonight? After the opéra."

"Montparnasse. Some new boite in the Rue Vavin. Supper with Mrs. Sinclair and her party. She phoned this afternoon."

"She adores you, this rich widow from America."

"My tragedy. Since I was—ten. Everybody adores me!"

"Mrs. Sinclair would like to marry you."

"If I were to marry anyone, chérie, it would be you. Unfortunately, neither of us can afford marriage. You would lose your alimony and I can not support the two of us."

"I've never understood about your dear father's fortune. I was living in England when he died.

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What has happened to all that money?"

"Nothing has happened to it. My sisters and I can never touch the capital. We get the income. But that's divided among the three of us. So! None of us ever has enough."

"And it will always be like this?"

"Always."

"What if one of you—dies?"

"That would, of course, change things. In the event of one dying the surviving two divide it all—half each instead of one-third."

"Makes it quite simple, doesn't it?" That was when she had said the shocking words. "You must kill one of your sisters."

"I do not find that amusing."

"But, Julien, it is the only way!"

"Suppose someone heard you?" He glanced around the quiet restaurant with its elegant diners. "You're joking, of course."

"And if I were not joking?" Her eyes held his but she was smiling. "Which would you prefer it to be? Denise or Pauline? Greedy, stupid Pauline? Or would you rather it be Denise? Silly, vague Denise?"

"Angelique!"

"Which, Julien? Which one—Pauline or Denise?"

Her questions still rankled. He heard them over and over, in his mind, as he entered the family mansion near the Parc Monceau. The tapestry-hung foyer was dark but a glow of light seeped down from the open stairwell. He climbed two flights of the curving staircase.

"Julien?" Pauline, as usual, had heard his feet on the marble steps.

He opened the elaborately carved door and faced the familiar sight of Pauline in her nest of lacy pillows, reading a novel. There was a box of bonbons on the bed table under a frill-shaded reading lamp. He noticed the pink Fragonard, a priceless original, hanging above her head and, for the thousandth time, cursed the fact that he was forbidden to sell it.

"A fine hour to be getting home!" Her greedy eyes peered out at him from between matching bags of flesh.

"If I do not return home all night it can be of no possible concern to anyone."

"I really don't know what you see in that silly Angelique! After all these years! You have pursued her since we were children." Plump fingers, flashing jewels, played with the mousy-brown curls which edged her fat cheeks. "Is it Angelique's girlish figure? And how she manages to keep it I don't understand! Or is it the charming way her hair changes color with every season?"

You must kill one of your sisters. The remembered words came clear again. "Which would you prefer it to be? Greedy, stupid Pauline?" Angelique was right. Pauline was greedy. And she was, certainly, stupid.

". . . had to call the doctor

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again for Denise," Pauline was saying.

"The doctor? What was it this time?"

"Such a scene! Middle of dinner. Denise snapped a wine glass and cut a gash in her hand. Blood all over everything. Table and carpet!" Pauline selected another bonbon and popped it into her eager mouth. "Doctor Ponsard says that Denise will always have accidents. Some people do, you know, more than others. She's had them all her life."

He turned back to the door without further comment.

"Don't bother Denise at this hour. Doctor Ponsard gave her something to make her sleep."

He closed Pauline's door and stood for a moment in the silent hall.

You must kill one of your sisters.

Doctor Ponsard says that Denise will always have accidents.

Silly, vague Denise?

Greedy, stupid Pauline?

Denise or Pauline?

Julien kissed the pale hand with its neat bandage. "Poor little hand."

"I cut it last night. Pauline had to send for Doctor Ponsard."

"She told me when I came home." He circled the breakfast table to his customary place as Martin, their manservant, appeared. "Café au lait and croissants this morning. Nothing more."

The old man bowed and returned to the kitchen.

"If I were only more relaxed," Denise continued, "Doctor Ponsard says I would not have these wretched accidents. But how does one learn to relax? It's less than a month since I slipped in my bath. Sprained my poor ankle! And only two weeks before that I nearly drank the wrong medicine. Remember? It was you, dear brother, who noticed the label on the bottle. Doctor Ponsard thinks I should take a little trip."

He could hear Angelique's voice. "Which would you prefer it to be? Silly, vague Denise?" What was Denise saying now?

". . . or perhaps visit Oncle Victor at Monte Carlo? Why couldn't we? All three of us!"

"Really, Denise! How could we afford it?"

"Other people manage to take holidays."

"Traveling expenses for three. Rather four! You and Pauline would, as usual, require a maid."

"Mais certainement!"

"Then there's the matter of gifts. Something for every member of Oncle Victor's family—those wretched children and grandchildren. And at the end of our visit, tips for all the servants—Oncle Victor keeps a staff of ten or more. And what about the little side trips and entertainments? Even though we were guests we should, at times, be required to pay for things. And the gambling—you know how Pauline adores the Casino!"

"I told Doctor Ponsard it was quite impossible."

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Julien Laurent pondered the problem during his customary late morning soak in the huge antique marble bathtub. He was getting no younger and neither were his sisters. Forty-one this year! Pauline would soon be fifty and Denise-forty-five.

He lifted one muscular brown leg out of the soapy water. Must do half an hour of exercises every morning. Starting tomorrow.

There was so much that he wanted. His own apartment, most of all, and a new model Citroën. A complete wardrobe instead of the two suits his tailor now made for him each year.

He sank deeper into the comforting warmth of the scented suds.

The only time in his adult life that he had ever been really happy was when he escaped from this place, away from his father and sisters. He had been too young for the Army but he had gone off to join the Resistance and, to his surprise, had enjoyed every moment of it. Life among the Maquis, taking pot shots at Nazi officers in Cannes, sleeping in barns, drinking raw wine, eating like a peasant. He had known, at the time, that he was completely happy.

Returning to Paris after the Liberation he had learned, for the first time, of his father's death, and had found himself a prisoner, with his two sisters, in this cold marble mansion.

Julien shivered in spite of the warm water.

How would he ever escape? What could he do to get money? None of the family heirlooms could be offered to dealers. Not even the diamonds! Denise had no feeling for precious stones, so Pauline wore all of their mother's jewels. They, with every item of antique furniture and all the fine paintings and other treasures, were listed in an inventory which had to be accounted for once a year when some petty official from the bank came to check.

Another thought flashed through his mind. What if he did, somehow, manage to get his hands on a large amount of money? Would he be satisfied to continue his affair with Angelique? There was, also, Ziza who sang love songs in the smart supper clubs. And Ingrid, that delicious natural blonde from Copenhagen, who worked as a model for all the chic fashion photographers. Dusky Janine and that wild Yvonne and—

But there was, vraiment, something special, very special, about the exquisite Angelique!

You must kill one of your sisters.

Back to that again.

Was it possible? Denise or Pauline?

"Which, Julien? Which is it to be? Pauline or Denise? Have you decided?" Angelique's head rested on his shoulder as he eased the Citroën through the evening traffic flooding down the Champs-Élysées.

"I've not slept for two nights.

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Thinking about what you said. At first the whole idea seemed fantastic. But then—"

"Yes?"

"I have thought of a little plan."

She raised her lovely head to look at him. "Oh? What sort of plan?"

"I shall tell each of my dear sisters that I am going to kill the other."

"But I do not understand."

"Very simple! This way each of them becomes an accomplice. And I shall be protected because she can never go to the police—the one who survives—without incriminating herself."

"Mon Dieu!"

"This way each will think I am killing the other."

"How clever you are!" She laid her head on his shoulder again. "Which is it to be? Denise or Pauline?"

"I don't know yet."

"When will you decide?"

"Now that I have a plan I must proceed very carefully."

"And when will you tell each that you are going to kill the other?"

"Perhaps tonight."

"Kill Pauline! What are you saying?" Denise bumped the bed table with her elbow as she pulled herself higher on the linen bolster. There was a faint clinking from the dozens of medicine bottles standing in neat rows under the reading lamp.

He sat on the wool blanket that covered her narrow bed. "Neither of us has ever been too fond of Pauline —and you know it!"

"Julien!"

"She was always the one, even when we were children, who had the best of everything. Papa spoiled her."

"That's true. He did." Denise smoothed back the straight gray hair from her bony forehead. "She was always Papa's favorite."

"It was never you who got the pretty dresses. And neither of us ever went on trips with Papa."

"I know! He even took Pauline to London that time. I begged and begged but he wouldn't take me." She fingered the neck of her nightdress.

"If Pauline were dead, you and I would divide her share of the income." Julien leaned forward and took one of her thin hands between both of his. "Enough money to live properly, to enjoy things."

"I might even go to Switzerland! That new sanitarium—"

"It would make all the difference between existing, as we've been doing, and living comfortably as we used to."

Denise whispered her next words, her eyes on the door. "How would you do it?"

"The simplest way, I should think, would be best. Perhaps go to her room in the night when she is asleep—"

"Yes?"

"A pillow over her face. Pauline will struggle but there will be noth-

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ing, afterward, to arouse suspicion. It will appear to be a heart attack. Doctor Ponsard has warned her that might happen if she didn't diet."

"When will you—kill her?"

"Soon."

"You will warn me? So I can be prepared. The shock—"

"If you wish."

"Makes me shiver, talking like this." She reached across the bed table for a box of pills. "Planning to kill Pauline—"

"Denise? What do you mean, kill Denise?" Pauline's jeweled fingers clutched at the lace coverlet.

"Exactly what I said—kill Denise." He sat beside her on the Louis XIV bed.

"But, Julien—"

"You know how unhappy she is, how wretched she's always been—"

"But to think of killing her! It's too horrible."

He took her plump hand and stroked it. Diamond rings scratched at his fingers. "She has always complained and whined at both of us. Nothing's ever right. And the illnesses! Her medical bills cost a fortune—"

"It's all she spends her money on!"

"Each year she discovers a new disease with more expensive treatments. And we both know there's nothing really wrong with her!"

"Such a waste of money!" Pauline reached for a bonbon with her free hand and fed it into her mouth. "When I think of all the delicious things I could buy—"

"That's just it! With Denise gone we'll divide her share of the estate—enough for us to do all the things we've been dreaming about!"

"I'll buy a new sports car." She smiled at the thought. "That car of mine is in such bad shape. You must remember, one day soon, to have another look at it for me."

"I will," he said. "Tomorrow."

Pauline's greedy eyes widened with anticipation. "How will you do it?"

"It will have to be arranged so that it appears to be an accident. Doctor Ponsard said that Denise is one of those types prone to have accidents."

"Yes, he did say that! I heard him."

"It should be quite easy to make it look as if she has fallen and drowned in her bath. Or perhaps a wire, stretched across the stairs, so she would pitch down to the bottom. There are many ways."

"How soon do you plan to arrange it?"

"Quite soon, I should think. We'll talk again—after I've given it more thought."

He bent to kiss her on the cheek. As always Pauline smelled of chocolate.

Several nights later a scream in the night roused Pauline from a deep sleep. She pulled on a négligé as she hurried out into the dark hall.

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Through the open door, opposite her own, she saw that Denise was not in her bed.

Julien came out of his room, tying the cord of his robe. "What happened?"

"Denise is not in her room."

He snapped on lights and crossed to join Pauline at the head of the curving marble staircase.

Martin and his wife, the cook, were peering down from the top floor.

Denise lay crumpled at the bottom of the staircase. Her thin figure seemed almost childlike in its plain blue robe.

"You've killed her!" Pauline squealed as she grasped his arm.

"I had nothing to do with this. I swear!" He started down the steps. "Be careful what you say in front of the servants."

Doctor Ponsard, summoned by telephone, announced that no bones were broken. "You are very lucky, Mademoiselle Denise, that you were not killed. Nothing more than a few contusions."

"You're certain of that?" Julien asked, standing with Pauline at the foot of the bed.

"Quite certain." The doctor scowled. "How did this happen, Mademoiselle Denise?"

"I could not sleep." Her voice was faint. "I thought that some warm milk might help. I didn't want to disturb Julien or Pauline or wake the servants. So I didn't turn on any lights. I started down the steps and—I tripped. Caught the heel of my slipper in something, I suppose—must have been my robe."

Doctor Ponsard shook his head. "These accidents are becoming much too frequent, Mademoiselle." He turned to the others. "If you would wait outside I will give her an injection so that she will sleep."

Julien led Pauline out of the bedroom, closing the door.

"You did that!" Pauline whispered.

"No."

"I knew it when I heard Denise scream."

"I swear I did not. This was one of her real accidents, exactly as the doctor said."

"You stretched something across those steps and made her fall!"

"No, Pauline! I had nothing to do with this. I was sound asleep."

"I don't believe you." She clutched the négligé over her plump breasts.

"It's the truth, I tell you."

"You promised to let me know when you were going to do it." She shivered. "Mon Dieu, it could have been me!"

"What are you saying?"

"I might have gone down to the kitchen for something to eat. I frequently do. I could have tripped down those stairs!"

"How could you imagine such a thing?"

"If you would consider killing Denise, why not me?"

"For the simple reason that you

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are my favorite sister—you always have been."

"You still plan to—to kill Denise?"

"Yes."

"But you will warn me? When you decide to do it? You promise!"

"I will warn you."

"It won't be just yet, will it, Julien?" She grasped his arm. "Not for a while?"

"Not for a while. No."

He would not dare to make a move for several weeks—not until tonight's accident had been forgotten. And it had been an accident. He'd had nothing to do with it.

As a matter of fact, he had only just realized which of his sisters he was going to kill. Pauline's accusations had forced him to a decision.

He would prefer life with Denise. She would go off to some fancy clinic with her extra money and he would see nothing of her.

Pauline, on the other hand, would try to manage his life. She had always been the more domineering of his two sisters. With money Pauline would become impossible—interfering and demanding.

Yes, it should be Pauline.

Life in the Laurent mansion became more and more irritating.

The month of May was unseasonably warm and early June was oppressive. Heat shimmered across the pavements of Paris. Tourists swarmed over all the Boulevards. Tempers sharpened in shops and restaurants.

Julien decided finally, in late June, that the time had come to carry out his plan. He spent the morning in the rear courtyard working on his Citroën. Just before lunch he devoted a few minutes to Pauline's old sports car. It was in such precarious condition, even though he had recently repaired it, that no one would be suspicious if the brakes failed. He had come to the conclusion, weeks ago, that Pauline's car was the logical instrument of her death.

By the middle of the afternoon he had put out of his mind what he had done.

What helped to forget was telling Denise, before he drove off to lunch, that the plan would be carried out within the week. Perhaps even tomorrow. In spite of her questions he told her no more. He divulged nothing of having tampered with Pauline's car.

It was as though telling Denise of Pauline's impending death removed it from his conscience.

Julien enjoyed a lengthy lunch with a violet-eyed actress who played small parts in films. He spent another hour selecting two cravats at one of his favorite shops. He ordered a pair of shoes from a British bootmaker near the Place Vendôme. Extravagances—but after all he would, shortly, have a great deal more money.

Late afternoon, after further shop-

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ping, he drove to a discreet bistro on the Left Bank where he had several drinks with Nicole, a charming creature who had recently published her first novel—un roman à clef which had become the literary sensation of Paris with everyone trying to identify their friends in it.

He was late getting home and had to bathe and dress more rapidly than he liked because of an early dinner appointment with Angelique. She was flying to Switzerland in the morning to escape the heat of Paris for several weeks. They must dine early so that she could get to bed at a reasonable hour.

Julien had reserved a table at a small restaurant on the Quai d'Anjou, near Angelique's apartment.

He stopped in to see Denise before he left for dinner. She was in bed, as usual, wearing a scarf around her shoulders in spite of the heat pressing through the open windows. "Aren't you dressing for dinner?" he asked.

"Later. Pauline isn't home yet. She had several errands to do this afternoon. But I've no idea where she could be at this hour."

Perhaps, already, there had been an accident. "Did she take her car?"

"No. Some friend called for her and she said she would come home in a taxi. Julien, you still won't tell me exactly when it's going to be?"

"Sometime this week. That's enough for you to know."

"Very well." She shrugged her thin shoulders under the scarf. "You're dining with Angelique as usual?"

"As usual."

"After Pauline is dead—"

"Yes?"

"—when you get that money, will you marry Angelique?"

"And leave you? Certainly not! How could you imagine such a thing." He bent to kiss her pale forehead, then started for the door. "Besides, Angelique would lose her alimony if she remarried. And she doesn't want that. No, our present arrangement is quite satisfactory."

"What time will you be home tonight?"

"Early, I should imagine." He opened the door without looking back.

"How early?"

"Before ten o'clock. Angelique's leaving for Montreux in the morning—off for a visit with friends."

"Ten o'clock."

As Julien ran down the marble steps to the foyer the heavy-glass entrance door swung open. Pauline came in, with several small packages under one arm. She was perspiring and slightly out of breath. He glimpsed a taxi driving away as she closed the door. "Aren't you rather late?" he asked.

"I had some errands to do." She dropped her smartly wrapped parcels on the console table, keeping only one ribboned box, obviously more bonbons. "Martin can bring these up later. I went to Madame de

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Courcey's for tea and, suddenly, it was late and, as usual, I could find no taxi. You're dining out again?"

"Yes."

Pauline squinted up the curving staircase. "How is Denise?"

"Her usual, complaining self."

"Are you still planning to—"

"I most certainly am."

"When?" Pauline patted at her moist face with a tiny handkerchief.

"Very soon—perhaps this week."

"I wish you'd not do this horrible thing." She clutched the bronze balustrade with one white-gloved hand. "Only, I suppose, I'd never believe you—next time Denise has one of her accidents. I'd think it was your doing. Like that last time, down the stairs."

"If I had done that I would have made certain there would be no chance of error. When I arrange an accident for Denise it must be a perfect and final one!" He bent to kiss her cheek. "If you'll forgive me, chérie. I am late."

"Will I see you later?"

"Very likely." He opened the entrance door and saw his Citroën waiting at the curb.

"What time?"

"I should be home before ten. I'll stop by your room."

"Ten o'clock."

Dinner on the restaurant terrace facing the Seine was comfortably relaxing. Cool air seemed to rise from the river. Angelique looked crisply elegant in beige linen, a tiny white hat perched on her honey-colored curls.

". . . and I was wondering," she was saying, "if you would care to join me next week? Montreaux is not terribly expensive. I go there several times a year. Surely you could afford a week at one of the smaller hotels. We'd have a week together, then drive back to Paris —"

"My old car would never make it."

"Thought you were going to work on it this morning?"

"I did. And it can manage Paris traffic but it would not last through a long drive to Switzerland and back. Anyway, I don't think I should be away from Paris when my dear sister dies."

"Your sister . . . Julien! You've done it?"

"Not yet."

"Then you—

"Soon. It is all arranged."

"I had no idea you were really going ahead with it. You've not said anything about it in weeks."

"We'll soon be able to take a real trip. Perhaps next month. Any place your heart desires. I may even have a new car."

"Which is it to be? Pauline or Denise?"

"I don't think it should be Denise. She's been hurt so often—even when she was a child. Pauline was the one who always had the best presents, all the treats and good times. Pauline was Papa's favorite."

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"Pauline?"

"Pauline."

Julien recognized Doctor Ponsard's elegant black limousine parked at the curb as he slowed his Citroën to a stop behind it. The uniformed chauffeur, smoking a cigarette, touched gloved finger to cap as Julien ran up the steps.

So it had happened! Pauline must have gone out again. In her car.

Martin opened the entrance door before Julien could bring out his key.

"What is it, Martin? What's wrong?"

"Mademoiselle Denise—"

"Denise?" He looked upstairs. There were lights in the drawing room on the next floor.

"They've taken her to the hospital." The old man trudged after him up the marble staircase.

"What happened?"

"Perhaps I'd better explain, Julien." Doctor Ponsard appeared from the drawing room.

"Denise has had another accident!"

"I will take you to her, mon ami. My car is waiting." He patted Julien reassuringly on the shoulder. "I thought it would be easier this way. When one is distrait it is better not to drive."

"But what's happened to Denise?" He followed the doctor down the steps. "What was it this time?"

"Later, Julien. Later."

Perhaps it would be wise not to ask too many questions. He must do nothing to arouse Ponsard's suspicions.

Later he must go out to the garage and fix Pauline's car so there would be no accident. He would have to postpone that now. Denise had upset his plans.

The long corridor was white and bare. It smelled of disinfectant.

A white-uniformed attendant pushed open swinging doors ahead of them and bowed them into a side corridor. There were dozens of closed doors.

"Not much farther, Julien." Doctor Ponsard motioned him on.

"Institutions always depress me. What's behind all these doors? The ill and dying? These empty walls should have a few cheerful paintings. And the food must be deplorable."

"I'm told it's not bad. In fact, I believe the head chef has worked for some of our best restaurants."

The attendant opened a door and stood aside for them to enter.

"We go in here." Doctor Ponsard went ahead this time.

Julien followed, surprised to see that the bed was empty. "Where is Denise?" He heard the door closing behind him as he noticed the bars at the window and the elegant leather suitcase waiting on the only chair. "That's my bag!" He turned to see the muscular attendant leaning against the closed door. The man was smiling.

Julien grasped the doctor's sleeve.

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"What's this all about? What is it?"

"Julien, I regret having to trick you."

"Trick me?" The words made no sense.

"Saying that Denise was here. We decided that this was the easiest way to bring you. Without force."

"What is this place?"

"You told each of your sisters that you were planning to murder the other."

"They told you that?"

"After they told each other."

"You surely don't believe—"

"How could you even consider such a monstrous deed, Julien?"

He looked around the bare room. "This is some sort of—asylum?"

"Your sisters have had you committed."

"How dare they!"

"Julien—"

"You will let me out of here. Immediately! I must phone my lawyer."

"He would only tell you that this is all quite legal. The official papers were signed this afternoon."

"Papers?"

"By both your sisters. Pauline brought them to me."

So that's what Pauline had been doing when she was out.

"With both your living relatives certifying the commitment papers," the doctor continued, "I would think you will be kept here for the remainder of your natural life."

"This is ridiculous!" He clutched Ponsard's sleeve.

The attendant moved forward instantly, pulled him away, and held him immobile, both arms pinioned.

"Let me go! You've got to let me out of here!"

"Sorry, Julien." The doctor moved toward the door.

"Denise and Pauline—I demand to see them!" He struggled to escape the attendant's grasp, but with no success. "You must bring them here—at once! Both of them!" He realized that he was screaming.

"It is not possible for you to see your sisters." Doctor Ponsard hesitated as he opened the door. "I will inform your attorney in the morning. Good night, Julien."

He watched the door close.

The attendant released his arms.

He had to say something—something to show the man that he was not insane, that this whole thing was a stupid mistake. "I understand your chef has worked in some of the best restaurants."

Without a sound the attendant backed toward the door.

"You see, I'm something of a connoisseur—of food, as well as all the other good things of life."

The stupid fellow only stared as he reached, behind him, for the doorknob.

"You understand? I am a connoisseur—"

The attendant was gone.

It was the following afternoon before his attorney appeared, a folded newspaper in his hand.

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"You must get me out of here!" Julien demanded.

"Most unfortunate—that your sisters had you committed yesterday."

"What do you mean?"

"Both of them signed the papers. It will be impossible, in the forseeable future, to do anything about a release for you. Not with both your closest relatives signing the papers."

"There must be something you can do! I will pay any amount!"

"I'm afraid, Julien," the old man shook his head, "that you have no money."

"What?"

"Your father's will specifies that if any one of his three heirs dies, becomes incapacitated, or is placed in an institution, the other two heirs divide everything."

"Institution? I'd forgotten about that!"

"Your share of the estate went to your sisters yesterday the moment they both signed the commitment papers." He sighed. "They did not want to be in Paris when you were brought here. So last evening they left for the Riviera."

"They went—by train?"

"No. By car. Your sister Pauline was driving."

Pauline's car!

"There has been an accident. The police say the brakes failed." He opened the newspaper and set it on the table. "It is here in the paper. Both your sisters—dead."

He didn't look at the newspaper.

"What about me? Now you can get me out of here!"

"I'm afraid this makes it even more difficult."

"But with my sisters dead the estate belongs to me!"

"No, Julien. Your father's will is explicit. In the event that, for any reason, the three heirs are dead or incapacitated, the entire estate goe- to your cousin, Mademoiselle Ans gelique."

"Angelique! She's not a real cousin!"

"A second or third cousin, I believe. It's all completely legal. Her mother was a great favorite of your father's—before you were born."

"You must get Angelique! She must return to Paris and—"

"I telephoned Mademoiselle Angelique this morning and informed her that she was the sole heir of the Laurent estate. She was shocked to hear the tragic news about your poor sisters, of course. And about you. But she said it would be quite impossible for her to return to Paris at this time. It seems she is to be married—"

"Married?"

"Some young man in Montreux. She has known him, she said, for several years." He was moving toward the door. "Mademoiselle Angelique wished me to express her sympathy to you—her deepest sympathy. And she asked me to arrange for special foods to be sent in for you. The best! Her very words! Fit for a connoisseur, she said."

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HOLLY ROTH's *last story*

"The Game's the Thing" is the last story Holly Roth wrote before her tragic and untimely death. We have delayed a long time in publishing Holly's last story—we just couldn't bring ourselves to do it; we hope you understand . . .

"The Game's the Thing" is a puzzling and provocative story, with deeper levels than a too-quick reading is likely to plumb. It is not the kind of story that shapes itself into clear and exact words—indeed, a synopsis, especially a precise one, would not do the story an iota of justice. But if you read it slowly—better still, if you read and reread it; if you let yourself come to grips with it; if you probe its meanings, explore and examine what it has to say, you will find it an enormously rewarding literary experience—in its own thoroughly wicked way . . .

It should also be mentioned that Holly Roth wrote this story before the publication of Dr. Eric Berne's GAMES PEOPLE PLAY: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HUMAN RELATIONS*—an interesting anticipation.*

Further editorial comment when you have finished reading (or rereading) Holly Roth's most unusual story . . .

THE GAME'S THE THING

by HOLLY ROTH

HOW MANY OF THE GANG, THE dramatis personae, should I introduce you to? Not all of them, I'm sure. We number about twenty, with a dozen more occasionals, and a handful of pure transients, for whom one meal is the alpha and omega. These transients fail to sense the admittedly elusive magnetism of the joint.

In addition to a few of the twenty regulars, who probably average an attendance of five nights a week, you must know the bartender, Nathan, if only because it was he who hit me with the eggbeater. His Game is Tough Guy; the eggbeater was the sort of slip that occasionally overcomes all of us.

To record Nathan's conversational essays is not difficult. Outside of occupational grunts like "Whaddulya have?" and "Anodder a da same?" he is possessed of only one sentence —"Whaddaya know?"—and that smothers any conceivable gambit.

It is rumored that Nathan has a "piece of the joint." I find this un-

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likely, if only because I can't imagine him begetting the words with which to seal the deal. On the other hand, if his syllables are not pure and positive servitors, flowing ably forth upon his least command, at least—unlike the experiences of the rest of us—they don't get him into trouble.

Nathan's Unanswered Door of Opportunity opens into the neighborhood bar-restaurant around the corner from our apartment. Inexpensive food, which is very bad. Expensive liquor, which is fairly good. It is a hangout, a rendezvous, a club, a refuge, and several other redundancies, among them a "home-away-from-home" for my wife and me.

By using this phrase I fit the joint into my primary Game: I-love-my-home-but-oh!-you-bar falls neatly into my pattern. This hearthside proxy is called the White Grotto—institutional-green walls, nicotine-orange ceiling, red-and-white checked tablecloths inlaid with coffee and *vin rosé* and veneered with slightly more transitory grease.

Each evening at about a quarter to six I arrive at the White Grotto for the purpose of relaxing after a strenuous day in the transit system's Purchasing Department. Doris, my wife, gets there about fifteen minutes later. She is an interviewer in an employment agency that caters primarily to window washers, and, of course, to their counterparts, the clients who wish to see clearly. Her office—two rooms on the sixth floor of an extraordinarily dirty office building in midtown—is farther away from the White Grotto than mine.

When she bounces in, I am looking judicious, kind, and thoughtful. She is simpering behind a thick smear of lamp-black that surrounds, smudges over, and damn near obliterates her already tiny eyes. My wife simpers naturally, because one of her very few roles is a subsidiary of the Femme Fatale—the Thwarted Femme Fatale.

This is a particularly unfortunate Game, and it reminds me, tangentially, of one of the few Games universally recognized and admitted to—that of the Napoleon Complex. A strong and often winning Game, that one—witness the corporal himself—but it is as ludicrous as any of them, except perhaps for this usually unsuccessful Femme Fatale business that poor Doris is stuck with.

(I know, of course, that you recognize and understand the Games of Life, but since you will probably insist on being obtuse, I shall go into the matter comprehensively as soon as I have got the immediate drama off my chest.)

This Game of my wife's forces me into the role of baby addax—I probably don't have horns yet, but when I do they will be remarkably and peculiarly twisted. My wife is fat because she is the Homemaker, a Game she carries on somewhere between the sixth floor of that ratty

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midtown building and the White Grotto—or while she is asleep, perhaps; but the title gives her the right to porcine eating; Homemakers are "comfortable-looking." Also, she communicates in baby talk.

For the rest, she is thirty-seven, looks forty-five, is unbecomingly, unsuitably, and disastrously bleached by some bungling lubber who cribs six bucks a week out of her.

We have been married eleven years and I have been unadulteratedly faithful: Don Juan is not my Game; pseudo-pedants look funny when haring; I am usually broke and perhaps a trifle lethargic.

My wife says, "Sweetie! And how is my lwittle dwaddy this evening?"

I get all the hell way off my stool and stand flatly and gallantly on the dirty floor. "Good evening, Doris," I say, and smile kindly.

Then we have a drink and mingle.

Doris and I are usually first in place. The Jenkins dame is likely to be next. Annabel Jenkins reminds me, by the law of opposites, of Nathan the bartender. She never shuts up. And she never opens her mouth Without Putting Her Foot In It. Since her other Games are Vicious Gossip and Falling-Down Drunk, the permutations are lethal.

Sober, Annabel is merely homicidal; drunk, she attains genocidal proportions. While en route to the terminal stage she practices a more minor form of carnage: she drinks a form of boilermaker of her own devising—alternating straight brandy with Alexander cocktails. It is a difficult progression to view, and it has occasionally caused bystanders to behave as if their own potions had been dolloped with French mustard.

The Jenkins female stalks into the White Grotto around Doris' time. She says, "What's new?" and she's not kidding. Then she says something like, "Doris, my dear, what a fabulous hairdo!"

Doris is a simpering cinch with a straight line: "You weally like it?"

"Well—fabulous was my word, and I'll stick with it."

The Jenkins' eyes are beady black, her body is a six-foot yardstick, and her nose is almost as straight and two-thirds as long. I personally consider her Games all wrong. She would do better as the Anachronistic Witch, or All-Out Grundy.

Annabel Jenkins glitters at me and says, "Good evening, Gordon. And what have you been doing with yourself all this long day?"

I have never been able to think of a satisfying answer. If I were Doris I'd tell her I have been working wwery, wwery hard, but my instinct is to announce that I have been copulating. Still, her question is delivered daily, and I don't think I could get away with that extravagant claim. So I mumble.

Just about that point Ralph usually breezes in. It is vital that you realize that the word "breezes" is

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carefully chosen. As that invaluable little cliché implies, Ralph is Hail Fellow Well Met. But implications are a waste in reference to Ralph. He breezes with all the tempestuous turbulence of a monstrous revolving fan propelled by a tornado.

Ralph is a Blabbermouth, a Jokester, a Don Juan—an amazingly successful seducer of presumably moronic dames. He is a Braggart, the halfwit whose remaining soupçon qualifies him as a dimwit; but he is cunning and practiced and is bolstered by a Vast Belief in Himself. He is good-looking in the manner of vaudeville circa 1920, and his conversation patters from the same epoch and milieu. He calls Doris "Little lady"—and may I drop dead right here if I'm lying—her responding smirk is always a little more languishing than usual.

On the evening in point he said, "Little lady, you are a heart's delight, a sight to warm the cockles of a man's heart, a treat for sore eyes."

Even beyond its palpable stench, Ralph's puerile patter riles up my bile for a purist reason: sacred clichés should not be reduced to the status of trifles for tautological twirps, or fribbles for diffuse dolts.

To me he said, "Hiya, owl? How're things in the sewers?"

Then he roared, and since there are those who find his reverberations pestilentiously infectious, several people laughed with him.

I remained detached—kindly, scholarly detached.

(Perhaps I should explain that I am a Homespun Scholar, a faintly educated pedant. To fit this Game, I developed a myopic astigmatism early in life. Blinking behind my black-rimmed glasses, I use words like scopiferous and favaginous. I quote voluminously, accurately, but with considerable concinnity. And I have an uncontrollable tilt toward alliteration. I am undoubtedly a bore, but not an unnerving one, and I deeply resent Ralph's success in reducing all my labors to nothingness with the use of one three-letter word—"owl.")

On this occasion Annabel Jenkins joined me in deadpan muscle rigidity, although she looked less detached and rather more malignant, like a stalk of *nux vomica.* Ralph makes an exception of Annabel—she is the only human female who doesn't bring him to a full cry of yoicks! and tally-ho!

Ralph's business is—you may have guessed?—salesman. "I'm in the selling Game," he says. He sells ladies' underwear, and I had been toying with this useful fact for some time. On the night in question I essayed a little jest—somewhat practiced, I shall admit only to you. Since he always refers to my sewers—presumably because so much of our transit is of the underground variety—I built my riposte solidly on his. Or dug it beside his.

"And you, Ralph, how go matters with the underpinnings?" I think that was not bad at all, really, but

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I courageously went all-out on the script. "How are things with *your* sew-ers?"

You get it? I presume so. But it's a matter of scanning, of course—doesn't deliver well orally.

The Jenkins surprised me by cackling. Doris looked confused. Ralph groaned revoltingly, and then I was more or less saved, if you see what I mean, by the advent of Janey.

Janey is a nice girl. Pretty in a tired way (who, living with Ralph, wouldn't be tired?), she is also sweet and polite. Her Games are Patient Motherhood, Hard Worker, Sensible Woman, and Long Sufferer. (But not Martyr; she's too nice and too sensible for that.) Unfortunately, Ralph is the child, the erring child she forgives and reforgives, tries to educate, supports, dresses, shores up (although no one ever needed it less; in fact, it may even be her fault that he is so cock-a-hoop).

They live in sin, although I can't think why. He couldn't be less faithful if they were married, and she couldn't be more so. Also, he would then be speaking at least one single truth when he introduces her as his wife—a canard that escapes him when he wants to make it clear to some babe that All Is Over Between Them.

Well, truth to tell, the rest blurs a bit. Much of it was a night like all the years of nights, and the little that was different was so trippingly but catastrophically different that I feel incapable of reporting it accurately.

I do remember that everyone kept repeating himself, but that wasn't at all unusual.

Janey had been in some rich woman's home all day arranging for a wardrobe. "Complete!" she kept saying. "The whole Nassau bit." She's a dressmaker—or couturier might be a better word; very able and clever and well paid.

Ralph announced that he found the whole thing damn annoying. Janey was on salary, he kept pointing out. She should get extra money for such a big job—"A commission on sales, like me."

The Jenkins said, "Like you—and you'd both starve." In response to Ralph's glare she cackled, but the hen sounded nervous.

Ralph told her to mind her own damn business. That is to say, what he said was, "Mind your own damn business." If I repeat—the way everyone seemed to be doing that night—it's because I was reluctantly impressed. No matter how Boundless his Blowhard Belief in himself, you'd think Ralph would have had some caution. Talking to Annabel Jenkins like that is simply inviting the Black Plague, or worse.

But, oddly, the Jenkins started babbling incomprehensively about window cleaners. Her Game requires her to deliver the single but fatal hammer blow; but for a while on that wild night she seemed to forget her Game—and that's as rare

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as a wyvern. She also kept repeating that she had an upset stomach—a point of even less relevance than fascination.

Doris kept saying to me, "Shouldn't we eat? Your little tummy needs nourisssment." And I was forced to take my hop and glide in this reiterative schottische: we never ate before at least four drinks, I kept pointing out, or before eight thirty, and my little tummy might whirl like a Maulawiyah dervish if it were forced out of routine. "Besides, I'm not hungry."

I must have said, "Besides, I'm not hungry" some twenty or twenty-five times.

"The materials she chose"—Janey was damn near glowing—"were superb. They'll give me a chance to produce. Boy, how I'm going to produce!"

"Everything except dough," her not-quite other half told her.

"Money isn't everything, honey, and—"

"There's always love." Annabel contrived a simper almost as practiced as one of Doris' lesser ones. "And honor," she added.

"—and in a way there *will* be more money. If I am more and more successful, I'll gain stature and—"

"And we can't eat stature."

"My upset stomach might have been caused by something I ate," ventured the Jenkins.

"Or drank," Ralph pointed out, his incaution attaining the suicidal state. He turned back to Janey. "What you need is—"

"Food," Doris told me loudly. "Speaking of eating, what you need is food."

"What I need is a drink," I told her. "Nathan!"

"Whaddaya know?"

"Not a damn thing except that I'm thirsty."

"Never said a truer word," Ralph roared thumping me on the back and Doris catching my reflex action.

"You kwicked me!"

"Sorry, dear."

"You mean you're thirsty?" the Jenkins asked Ralph. "Or that you don't know a damn thing?"

"How did you manage to screw that one up?" Ralph asked her.

"Screwed up—*that's* how my stomach felt this morning. I stayed home all—"

"Same awround?" Nathan asked.

It's a damnable question, and it's one that he uses only when he feels mean. I wondered what the hell I had done to *him*. I said, "Of course."

"Wonders will never cease!" Ralph banged my back.

"Don't *kwick*—"

"Is he hurting you, honey chile?" Ralph was solicitous. "He's just afraid to hit me, and he's taking it out on the poor little woman." He enveloped her in a clinch that suggested that he was Mrs. Kangaroo and she was Junior.

My stomach revolved like Annabel Jenkins'. I said, "Your gracious acceptance is noted."

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"Don't mind him, Gordon." Janey patted my hand. "He's never learned the difference between generosity and wild-spree spending. Stop that nonsense," she added to Ralph. Ralph was patting Doris' knee. "You're embarrassing Doris."

"And the rest of us," the Jenkins snapped. "Can't you behave, at least in public?"

"Shut up, you old bag," Ralph told her.

It is my conviction that with those words he sealed our fates.

"As for you, honey"—he beamed at Janey and increased the tempo of his oscillatory kneading—"you don't understand money, how a guy has to spend it to make it. Women"—he shrugged hugely, which brought his hand well above Doris' knee—"women have no sense of money."

I never saw Janey get really angry at her big baby before, but then I never saw him massage quite so high either. Whatever the cause, she must have lost control to say what she said. "We don't?" she snapped. "We have enough sense to save our commissions for a rainy day, or a day in which you have to spend a lot to make nothing. We—"

And then she stopped dead and put her thin hand over her mouth.

"Commissions?" Ralph unhanded Doris, and she damn near fell off the stool. She must have been leaning with all her hundred and sixty lumps. "Commissions?" he said again. No one ever accused Ralph of having a mind that moved like a silver arrow. "You mean you been getting commissions all along? Holding 'em out on me?"

Janey's face was miserable and very white, so white that his slap left a set of prints that looked as if they had been stamped in red ink.

Everyone likes Janey. Even the Jenkins probably liked Janey. But I think the slap was merely the trigger. Annabel's cauldron was bubbling merrily, the venom at the hot spurting point. "And because I had such a bad stomachache"—her eyes were little black daggers—"I stayed home all day. I had nothing to read. And I just happened to have those binoculars there, and your windows had just been cleaned, Janey."

Doris whimpered, "I want to eat."

Annabel pivoted like a Harlem Globetrotter. "Was it your people who supplied the window cleaner?" Doris crumpled as if she had been hit in the bread basket. "At the very least," Annabel told her, spreading the lye thick, "you could have pulled down the shades, you or Ralph. I could see straight into Janey's room, Doris, and you don't look a bit like her. Too fat."

What happened next appears to be clearer to almost everybody than it is to me. The eggbeater, the broken crème de cacao bottle—I know nothing about the airborne utensils and cutlery. What I do know is the reason *why* I am being forced to this miserable rehash of

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what was a pretty disgusting hash in the first place.

The Games.

That we are all engaged in a series of Games, big and little, is a basic Fact of Life obvious to the tiniest intelligence, and therefore to you (no slight intended). But it is unlikely that you will quietly admit that you understand. Does each human being think he alone knows the truth? Or does he think the universal truth applies to him alone?

A third possibility is that each man recognizes the existence of the universal Games but believes (hopes? prays?) that the Games are not *quite* universal. He says to himself, "If there is one exception, just one in ten million, I am off the hook —for other men may then believe that *I* am that exception."

The pitiable possibility is that all men shoot for that fantastic target —"I don't know what *you* are playing at," each one says, "but *I* am real—taking each moment seriously and honestly, dealing with each problem and person on its or his merits, striving—extrovertedly—to come to decisions and solutions." Is each man trying to bluff all the billions into taking him at face value?

Face value—there it is. The Game is that we set our own face values, play our roles as we see them. Why we see them that way I don't know, and I don't think it matters. (Mr. Freud's doctrines probably apply; we are probably assigned our Games by the traumata we experience during that purgatory which is childhood.) I am prepared only to deal with the Here and the Now, quite large enough subjects.

In this Here and Now, the number of Games each man has is in itself important. The distinction between the totally primitive and the ultra-civilized is merely a matter of the number of roles. A deep-forest savage may have only two roles—mighty hunter and mighty lover. He stops—and is stopped—there. But take a physicist: a possible destroyer of the world, a decider of fate, a seer and a see-er. And there are more: the absent-minded and unworldly super-professor, the riser-above monetary considerations, and perhaps a dozen other roles, from monumental ones down to I-don't-understand-women-because-I've-never-had-the-time.

Me. Well, I have comparatively few Games. An important one, in the sense that I give it importance, is that of Family Man. Just where this one came from is not clear. Each of my parents was an only child. Shortly after I was born my mother went off with an itinerant flapjack tosser. (I've often wondered what *her* Game was; it's hard to see it from here.)

Furthermore, Doris and I have had no children. But I am a loud believer in the sanctity of the home, in the pleasures of the fireside (we don't have any, but Symbols are fantastically important in the Games

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—as are the clichés that tag them, like house slippers which are revoltingly referred to in our home as "papa" shoes), in the weekly salary check to the little woman—"little woman" alone pretty well says it.

All this, you understand, has nothing whatever to do with whether or not I love my wife—I refuse categorically to discuss the matter—or whether or not I happen to like our three rooms and balcony, which is suspended thirty feet over one of the busiest thoroughfares in the United States. The Game is that I project myself—in my mind's eye, and therefore to the world—as a Man of Family and Defender of the Home.

Also I am a Plodder, which means I shall never get anywhere. If I have any sort of inspiration I must naturally dismiss it since Plodders cannot, by definition, be instigators. The success or failure of all men, in every conceivable endeavor, lies in the Games. The Timid Soul is not going to be first on the moon, nor is he likely to win the Grand Prix at LeMans. But the Up-and-Comer must up and come, as inevitably as helium; that is his Game. This of course accounts for the successful morons we have all met so often (bosses are a prime example), as well as for the charming, ne'er-do-wells.

Two other of my Games are mutually exclusive, a usual fact (since there are a few thousand Games distributed among the billions, the patterns of necessity must repeat endlessly): I am a man of great patience, forebearance, and kindness; I am possessed by a murderous temper. This contradiction is dealt with by "He is long-suffering and kind but when he does lose his temper, he Sees Red."

As I said, clichés are at the root of understanding the Games—they are the *language* of the Games. No other language is necessary—the rest is either self-delusion or outer-directed deception. "Words," Lord Chesterfield once said, "are the dress of thoughts"—but there is little doubt that he did not intend the ultimate verity of his phrase. Despite my own usages—I may be better clad than the dear Lord ever anticipated—someone would do well to start a nudist colony of words; to abolish the sham. The molting operations would leave the necessary bones—the trite truths—and the impossibility of avoiding clichés would be laid bare, as it were. Imagine trying to understand a writer who succeeded in this vast bluffing attempt and abolished all clichés from his prose—!

I hope you understand that I am a cynic in only the gentlest of terms, such as in dealing with truth or reality or vice or tragedy. And at this moment, talking intimately with you, I am being not so much cynical as profoundly truthful—or are they the same, and have I been unprecedently wise? No matter, I wish only to make it clear that my tone is purely of the moment. I

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have been deeply shaken, understandably enough. And you, only you, can help me. It is to you that I must make plea and explanation.

I do not refer to the details of what my lawyer says is going to be called murder. Incomprehensible as it seems to me, he says Ralph shows fair signs of expiring; I would have said that the loud and blustering Game is normally almost unending. Still, if Ralph persists in this attempt to achieve the happy release, I am in rather a pickle, you see?

I suggested a plea of unpremeditation, but my lawyer says the witnesses agree that when I broke the crème de cacao bottle I showed a nice attention to detail in the matter of jagged edges, achieving a handily furcated effect. To my alternate proposal—the Unwritten Law—he said that juries are often unable to read the Unwritten when events take place in a bar or bordello. When I objected that they are by no means synonymous, he said that juries object to the "by no means." My lawyer, in fact, is a bit mopish about the denouement of this affair.

But you and I, Doctor, you and I understand that Kipling had it right: the Game is more than the player of the Game. My Games quite literally took the matter out of my hands; and taken in conjunction with Ralph's, with Doris'—even with Miss Jenkins' and Janey's—the Games provided this ending. A Defender of the Sanctity of the Home, a Home Loving man who Saw Red . . .

On the other hand, we also understand that none of this can be admitted to a world which persists in denying the existence of the Games, and that merely to do so would be to cause you yourself to be suspected of insanity. So you will have to apply the cliché you boys use all the time when you meet a dilemma of this nature: I killed Ralph While of Unsound Mind. You are going to have to lie, Doctor, and say that I was nuts.

You see?

EDITORS' NOTE: You see? Life and Death are Games. Murder is a Game. Nearly everything is a Game . . . even Survival.

We hope you agree with us that Holly Roth's last story was perhaps her most important one—because it has something important to say to all of us: chiefly, that murder in our time can be motivated not only by violent emotion but also by violent non-emotion—that is, by conformity to, and habitual acceptance of, slogans, symbols, and even of gamesmanship. It is a cynical and satirical thought—a truly terrifying thought . . .

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newest police procedural by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**LAWRENCE TREAT**
TITLE:	***M As in Mugged***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Lieutenant Decker
LOCALE:	United States
COMMENTS:	*On his 60th birthday Lieutenant Decker was reminded of his first important arrest, 30 years before. Was he any part of the man he used to be? . . . One of the best stories in this prize-winning series.*

LIEUTENANT WILLIAM DECKER, Chief of Homicide and something of a character even to himself, woke up at six a.m. and remembered that this was his birthday. The idea annoyed the hell out of him.

He sat up and glanced at his wife, Martha, sleeping alongside him. He slipped out of bed as quietly as he could, went into the bathroom, and peeled off his pajama top. In the mirror he saw a tall straight figure. His stomach was lean and flat, his gray eyes were somber, and the amount of his hair was moderate. Just moderate.

He slapped his chest hard, and laughed. "Brother!" he said aloud. "*You* ain't sixty!"

But he was.

He might have accepted the fact and survived the day without incident if it hadn't been for Martha's birthday present. It was wrapped in fancy paper and propped up in front of his plate at the breakfast table. After he'd started the coffee, he picked up the package and untied the ribbon. Inside was a framed photograph of himself, in uniform, at the age of 28. Underneath the picture was the printed caption, PATROLMAN WILLIAM DECKER.

He remembered that picture. He'd been a rookie then, and the police were looking for a man named McGovern who'd held up a filling station and killed the attendant.

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McGovern came from what was called Tough Town in those days, and you didn't go down there unless you belonged. But Patrolman Bill Decker went anyhow—to a big wake they were holding for somebody whose name he'd forgotten long ago. Young Patrolman Decker figured that McGovern might show up there, and he did.

Thinking back, Decker realized that he owed that first triumph to a kind of cockeyed daring, along with more luck than any man had a right to expect. He'd drifted around the crowded hall until he'd spotted McGovern. The killer was standing near a door, and Decker grabbed him and hustled him out to a waiting car. Everybody who saw the scuffle assumed it was a private fight—just a couple of brawlers feeling their oats, the way it sometimes happens at a wake. Consequently nobody interfered

As a result of the arrest Decker had got a citation and a promotion, and his picture in the newspaper. This one. And Martha must have gone over to the *Chronicle* offices, borrowed the negative, and had it reproduced, framed, and touched up. Because even Bill Decker himself didn't think he'd ever looked *that* handsome.

On his 60th birthday he was at his desk at nine, in the tiny cubicle crammed with filing cabinets and stacks of technical magazines he had kept to read and had never managed to. Nobody, including the stuffed crocodile on the bookcase, gave him flowers or a medal or even sang *Happy Birthday* to him—for all of which he was deeply grateful.

Out of the morning's batch of reports that had reached his desk for initialing, he selected two for the Homicide Squad's attention. One was an assault case that he put Bankhart on; the other was a burglary that he assigned to Mitch Taylor—actually, it was a stolen car case and not the responsibility of the Homicide Squad. They handled crimes against the person, but they were notified of all larcenies, and when Decker thought it worthwhile, he ran an independent investigation.

The stolen car was a green Chevy, 1965 model, out-of-state license plates, 649T87. Owner, Harold Waverly, dress salesman. He'd been traveling with his wife and he'd stopped at an antique shop. Since he'd neglected to lock the car and take the key out of the ignition, he was practically asking for somebody to get behind the wheel and drive off; and somebody obliged.

The report listed the loss, in addition to the car and the Waverlys' personal belongings, as 20 dresses valued at fifty dollars apiece, plus another thousand dollars worth of expensive accessories. Which made quite a haul for the obliger.

So—had Waverly been inexcusably careless, or had he set up the crime and collaborated in it? The answer could be either way, and

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Lieutenant Decker told Taylor to send for the Waverlys and see what cooked.

With that off his chest, Decker picked up the latest issue of *Law & Order* and started reading. But his mind kept wandering, and after a few minutes he got up and went down the hall. He spent the better part of an hour in the Records Room, going over some new procedures that had just been set up.

When he returned, Mitch Taylor was in the outer office with a young couple who Decker assumed were the Waverlys. She was a slender willowy brunette with adoration in her eyes, and she was saying, "It was such a beautiful day. We stopped on the road to pick some flowers and—"

Decker marched past and closed the door to his office, but the image of the girl stayed with him as if it had been stamped on his retina. Still, because he always noticed people and had developed the habit of filing faces and remembering details, he had a picture of the husband, too. He had dark hair and an Irish-looking face, and he was well-built.

Later on, Taylor came in and reported. "The guy's up on Cloud Nine," he said. "He says he feels like a jackass, leaving the car unlocked, but they were on their honeymoon and business trip, both. And with a dame like this Brenda—well, you saw her."

Decker had, and he thought of Martha and himself more than 30 years ago. She'd looked like this girl—they could have been sisters. But where did Taylor come off reminding Decker of things like that?

"Apart from the nuances of burgeoning love and its impact on an ignition key," Decker said coldly, "what did you find out?"

Taylor looked hurt, as he usually did when Decker threw his vocabulary around. But that was one of the ways Decker maintained his authority. He could sling vernacular with the best of them, but none of his boys could hit hyperbole at the Decker level. He assumed the squad repeated some of his soaring poetical flights. In any case, they were supposed to. His rhetoric kept him a cut above their level.

Taylor put some style sheets, with the dresses reproduced in full color, on the desk. "This is the line he was carrying. High-class stuff." Taylor, an authority on whatever happened to be the subject, pointed to one of the pictures. "Brenda was wearing this one. You know, Chief, they stopped off to look at the view at High Point, and later on they parked along the road and went out into a field. She picked flowers, a whole bunch of them. She's a city gal and doesn't get the chance often, and then they—" Taylor broke off and studied the ceiling.

Decker, thinking of his own honeymoon with Martha and of the time *she'd* picked flowers, jerked back to attention. "Brother!" he

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said. "That was some investigation you made. Got the wedding pictures to go with it?"

Taylor pushed the style sheets aside. "Well," he said, "I guess that's all there is to it."

Decker had his usual lunch across the street, with some of the bureau heads, but after returning to his office he couldn't get down to work. He kept thinking of Patrolman Decker and how he'd collared McGovern 30 years ago. No gun—just man to man, with an armlock and with hard fists to back him up. He kept wondering how 60-year-old Lieutenant Decker would stack up alongside that rookie patrolman.

Suddenly tired of sitting and moping, Decker slapped his desk drawer shut, got up, and stepped outside. He said he had an errand, would take his car, and they could call him if anything turned up. He strode out, muttering to himself. What would anybody need him for? An old man of 60—

He drove down to the river to Tough Town. It wasn't called that any more. It was still a reasonably tough district, but the Irish had moved on to other places; they'd given up their political control and let the Italians and Puerto Ricans take over. The tight cohesiveness of a single ethnic group was broken.

Decker parked in front of a small supermarket, buzzed the despatcher, and said he was leaving his car and would be back in an hour or two. Then he locked the car and started walking. For some obscure reason he wanted to find the hall where that wake had taken place 30 years ago. It was near here, somewhere. Down an alley, as he remembered it. But the buildings had changed, and that new supermarket had him all mixed up. He tried an alley but wasn't sure whether it was the right one.

It was bounded on one side by the brick wall of a warehouse, and on the other by a high wooden fence. The fence was broken in several places, and you could step through to an empty lot where, judging by the rubble and the charred beams, there had recently been a fire. Farther on there was a broad gap in the fence. A couple of jalopies were parked in the lot, together with a brand new Thunderbird and a green Chevy. The Chevy had out-of-state plates, 649T87. Decker walked over to the car and opened the door.

The key was in the ignition. A metal bar had been fitted across the rear to hold a rack of dresses, and a couple of hangars and the remains of a bouquet of wild flowers were strewn across the back seat. He noticed daisies and buttercups, a few weeds, and to his surprise some shiny green leaves that he recognized as poison ivy. If Brenda had picked those, she certainly was a city girl. And a damn lucky one, too, not to be all blistered up today and having one hell of a honeymoon.

Decker locked the car, put the

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key in his pocket, and started to retrace his steps, to report what he'd found. As he emerged from the lot, he noticed a girl at the other end of the alley. She was wearing a bright, yellow dress—one of the models Taylor had shown him in Waverly's style sheets.

Decker switched directions and followed the girl.

She had dark hair and she walked with a light, springy step, and she was young. She had no idea anyone was behind her, so she was easy to follow. She swung left at the end of the alley, floated along for a couple of blocks, then entered a tavern. The neon sign read *Gino's*.

The Lieutenant, marching along in no particular hurry, reached the tavern door, opened it, and went inside. The girl wasn't there.

A quick look told him all he needed to know. There was a curtained doorway at the rear. The girl had gone either to a back room or upstairs, or else had slipped out through a side exit.

The bartender was squat, partly bald, and had tired, worried eyes. A broken-down rummy, sitting on a stool at the far end, was draped over the bar. He lifted his head to see who had come in, then let it drop back. The juke box, going full blast, was playing rock-and-roll, and seven boys in their late teens were bunched around a rear table.

At Lieutenant Decker's appearance they seemed to react to some unspoken signal; they swung around and stood clear of the table.

Decker had seen enough. All he had to do was say, "Sorry, I guess this is the wrong place." Then he could have turned around and left, as any sensible cop would do when he walked in on a gang of young punks who were obviously spoiling for a fight. He has nothing to gain and everything to lose. But Decker was 60 today, and he was out to prove something—at least, to himself.

He sat down at the bar. "Make it a beer," he said.

The rummy, lost in his alcoholic daze, grunted. The bartender merely frowned, looked even unhappier than before, and drew a beer. In the mirror Decker saw six of the gang deploy to cut him off.

They wore the uniform of delinquency—black boots, tight trousers, and zipper jackets with their names lettered across the back. The boy who went to the front door had *Joe* written on the back of his jacket, and the one who covered the rear was *Pete*.

The four others fanned out in a rough semicircle, three of them behind their leader who, according to his jacket, was *Duke*. There was only one boy who seemed not to be a member of the gang, and he was sitting at the table around which the others had been grouped.

The non-participant had a coke bottle in front of him, and judging by his neck and the oversized

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Adam's apple that bobbed up and down inside his throat, he was tall and gawky and on the scraggly side. Can't count on much help from him, Decker decided.

Duke came over and straddled the stool next to Decker. He made a clucking sound to attract attention. "Hi, Grampa," he said. "You come from around here?"

Decker turned slowly. Duke was about 19, dark-haired, slightly chubby of face, heavily built. His eyes and manner were insolent, as if he intended to have some fun at the expense of an old man.

"More or less," Decker said.

"That's a hell of an answer, from an old geezer like you."

The bartender put down the glass he was polishing and moved to Decker's end of the bar. "Not in here, Duke," he said. "I don't want any trouble."

Duke laughed. "Who's making trouble? I just thought I'd let Grampa stand us a round. You need the business, don't you?"

The bartender, evidently Gino the owner, scowled. Decker heard a sound at the rear of the room and looked past Duke. Duke turned, too.

The girl Decker had followed in here had just parted the curtains at the rear. Instead of the yellow dress, she was now wearing a skirt and a blouse, and her body seemed to flow inside it. The gawky boy stood up, and she stopped next to him. They said something to each other and they both smiled; but her smile froze as she became aware of the menace from Duke and his gang. As if seeking support from the gawky boy, she reached out for his hand, but he yanked it back with a wince.

She drew in her breath and gave him a questioning look. He whispered something that apparently satisfied her, and she took his other hand. Then the pair of them came over to the bar.

She spoke to Gino. "Dad," she said, "we're going over to Alma's. I'll be back for supper."

Gino nodded. "Fine. See you later." He was obviously relieved to see her go, but he tensed up as she reached the door and Joe grabbed her companion by the shoulder.

"Take it easy, Benjy," Joe said. "Little boys shouldn't run after girls."

The girl faced Joe angrily. "He's coming with me and you have no right to stop him."

Benjy touched her shoulder. "Go ahead, Louise, I'll make out. Just go ahead—*go*!"

She hesitated and looked at her father for support, but he shook his head and repeated Benjy's words. "Go ahead." She seemed to sag for a moment, then she went out swiftly.

Benjy stepped back. There was a rash on his hand, covered with the kind of white lotion used for poison ivy. Decker picked up his beer glass, took a leisurely sip, and gave Duke

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his full attention. "If you want me to buy you a round," he said, "maybe you'd better tell me who you are."

Duke, still straddling the stool, bent forward and bowed in mockery. "Duke the Fluke," he said. "And who the hell are you?"

"Got a last name?" Decker asked. Duke didn't bother answering, and Decker went on. "How about your friends—who are they?"

"You're a nosey old guy, Grampa," Duke said, and he reached out to tweak Decker's nose. Decker jerked back, and Duke let out a roar of laughter. "How about those beers, huh?" he said.

Gino, inching over, said in a low voice, "Better do what he says, Mister. You're in trouble."

And that, Decker reflected, was the understatement of the year. He was in the wrong place, under the wrong circumstances, and he was trapped. If he tried to walk out now, they'd block him off or trip him up or slug him. He was up against a nasty situation, and he had to face it.

Staring at Duke and holding him with his eyes, Decker casually pulled back the flap of his jacket. His badge showed briefly as he took his gun out of its holster and leveled it.

"Copper!" Duke exclaimed, jerking backward.

Decker nodded. "That's right. So why don't you boys just run along and forget all about this?"

Duke, gazing at the gun, licked his lips and blinked. Then he raised his hand, and the gang tightened the circle, surrounding Decker. For a moment the idea flashed across his mind that the rookie patrolman of 30 years ago would have handled this with his fists. Maybe. And got the living daylights beaten out of him.

"You going to shoot all six of us?" Duke asked, grinning confidently.

The punk knew his way around. He knew that the last thing any cop wants to do is use his gun before he's actually attacked and before his life is in danger. In a way, pulling the gun had put Decker on the defensive and placed him in the wrong.

Then he did a crazy thing. It was a violation of every basic rule of police work, and specifically of Section 48-a of Department regulations. If Mitch Taylor or anyone else on the Homicide Squad had pulled a fool trick like this, Decker would have given him a lecture that would have made his hair curl, and stay curled. But what was the use of being a Lieutenant if you had to stick to the book?

So what Decker did was to shift his grip on the gun, take it in both hands, and break it open. He removed five of the six bullets and held them out. "For souvenirs," he said amiably. "One apiece."

His action, calm, friendly, and completely unexpected, threw them off balance. With no idea of how to handle the new situation, they automatically accepted Decker's invi-

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tation and reached out greedily. "Gimme—gimme!"

Pete, coming from the rear of the room, called out, "Hey, how about me? I want one, too."

"Sorry, Pete," Decker remarked. Addressing the boy by name split him off from the gang and helped break up their solid front. "None left," Decker said, "except the one I'm keeping for myself." He pulled his jacket open so that they could see he had no cartridge belt. Then, snapping his gun shut and holstering it, he slid off the stool.

"Come on, Benjy," he said to the gawky lad. "We're leaving."

Again the gang, uncertain of themselves now and wondering whether this was an arrest or a rescue, accepted Decker's authority and just watched uneasily as he took Benjy by the arm and led him outside. Benjy came along docilely.

They'd gone almost a block before the boy spoke up, with a slight, nervous stutter. "M-mister," he said, "they'll beat me up after this. They'll half kill me."

"What for?"

"For siding with a copper."

Decker made no comment. He kept on walking, turned into the alley, and headed for the empty lot where the cars were parked. He strode over to the green Chevy and unlocked the door. "Get in," he said.

Benjy hung back. "W-what—"

"Get in."

Nervously, Benjy obeyed, and Decker sat down next to him. "Why did you take it?" he asked.

Benjy gave Decker a pleading look.

Decker said, "You got poison ivy from handling the flowers back there, and your girl was wearing one of the stolen dresses. So I know you took the car."

"Louise had nothing to do with it. Are you going to arrest me?"

"Just tell me what happened."

"Please, I—"

"Better tell me, Benjy."

"That gang—I want them to lay off me." Benjy compressed his lips and stared at the dashboard. His fists clenched and unclenched as he tried to make up his mind.

"I took the car," he said suddenly. "I saw it there, nobody was around, and the key was in the ignition. If I drove it over here and let them have the dresses—all except one, that was for Louise—well, I thought they'd stop riding me. I never did anything like it before and I never will again, and I didn't keep anything, except that yellow dress for Louise."

"And after you brought the car here, what then?"

"The flowers were on the front seat. I moved them out of the way, and I went riding with Louise. When we got back, the gang was waiting and they said they wanted to see me this afternoon, at that bar. I think they wanted to sell the car and make sure I wouldn't talk about it or about the dresses or any-

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thing else. Then you came in and —well, that's all."

A cop is no social service worker. He's neither judge nor D.A., and he doesn't decide whom to arrest and whom to let go. A cop enforces the law and lets others wrestle with social and moral questions. Even a rookie like young Decker had known that much.

And therein lay the difference. Lieutenant Decker, 60 years old, listened, asked questions, and heard a long story of Benjy's background and struggles. When the boy had finished talking, Decker made his decision.

"Benjy," he said, "move over to the other side of town and never show up around here. If you do that, I'll see that you get a job. But stay away from this neighborhood."

"And Louise?"

"You'll have to work that out with her."

"And you're not going to arrest me?"

"What for?" Decker asked.

You get sentimental on your 60th birthday. You do things that make no sense and can kick back at you later. You violate rules and take a chance on nobody's finding out.

A few minutes later, when Decker and Benjy climbed out of the Chevy and the Lieutenant headed back for his own car, he didn't feel particularly young, but he had a heady feeling that exhilarated him. It lasted until he'd gone part way down the alley and saw an old man who was trying to crawl to the protection of a doorway; the going was rough.

Decker ran over, bent down, and supported him. "What happened?" Decker asked.

"They hurt me," the man said, gasping. "They took my money."

"Who?" Decker demanded.

"They came from behind. I couldn't see."

Decker called to Benjy. "Get to a phone and send for the police and an ambulance. Tell them Lieutenant Decker, signal eight, and tell them how to get here."

"Sure," Benjy said. He went off quickly.

Decker removed his coat, folded it for a pillow, and made the old man as comfortable as possible. "What's your name?" Decker asked.

"Slater. Walt Slater."

"How much money did they get?"

"Fifteen bucks. I just won it. Pool game. I—"

Decker noticed Slater's fingers, smeared with blue cue-chalk. "Take it easy," Decker said. "I'll take care of you."

He could see the spot where Slater must have been mugged, next to a break in the fence. You could hide behind the fence, step out, and grab a man from behind. The victim would never see who hit him, and if you beat him up the way this old guy had been beaten, he'd be in no condition to identify you when you ran off. For that matter, you didn't have to run—you could just walk.

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Decker, scanning the ground and wondering if there'd been other muggings here, saw the cartridge. He picked it up. It was the same make and caliber as those from his own gun, and it was a fair guess that this was one of the five souvenirs he'd handed out a little while ago. One of the punks must have dropped it accidentally during the mugging.

The cartridge wasn't proof positive, and Duke and his gang would certainly alibi each other; but the cartridge was enough to make Decker sure in his own mind. He fingered the piece of ammunition for a moment, then he broke open his gun and inserted the cartridge. He slipped it in the chamber next to the one that was still filled, then he lined up the cylinders so that, if he pulled the trigger, he'd fire those two bullets and not just lick away on empties.

The job took him only a few seconds, then he put the gun back in its holster and returned to the old man. After about five minutes Decker began to wonder why a patrol car hadn't arrived. At the least, he ought to be hearing the sound of a siren.

He looked to the far end of the alley and saw Duke come sauntering toward him. Three of the gang were following him and the other two brought up the rear, with Benjy in tow. They'd intercepted him, and now Duke had come to finish the episode in the bar. He'd lost face and he had to re-establish himself, regardless of risks. If a cop had made a monkey out of him, he had to make a monkey out of the cop.

Decker backed against the wall and waited for Duke to reach him. Duke stopped a few feet away, three of the gang next to him.

"Some trouble?" Duke asked sarcastically.

"Phone the police," Decker said crisply.

Duke's grin was insolent. "Who, me?"

"I gave you an order," Decker said.

Duke shrugged. "Did you beat him up?" he asked with a smirk.

Decker, staring, noticed the streak of blue chalk on Duke's cheek. Slater, in the struggle, must have clawed at Duke and left the mark. It could be analyzed and shown to match the chalk on Slater's fingers.

If Decker could grab Duke now and keep that smear of chalk intact, the kid was a dead duck; but if Decker waited, if the chalk rubbed off, the case would depend on Duke's alibi and probably collapse.

So how do you immobilize a cruel and ruthless punk and keep him from running away if you get help, or from assaulting you if the help doesn't come in time?

Decker took out his gun. "I gave you an order," he said again.

Duke laughed, and Decker raised his gun and fired a shot in the air. "Help—police!" he yelled.

Duke motioned to Joe and Pete,

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who were standing beside him. "Let's take him," he said. "He fired at me, I got a right to defend myself. You saw him fire, and it's his last bullet!"

"Stand back," Decker said quietly. "Stand back, or I'll shoot."

"With what?" Duke said. He laughed contemptuously. "Put that toy down. Copper, I could take you with my left arm in a sling and my right one tied up. Want to see?"

He lunged, and Decker fired his second bullet. Duke fell, clutched his leg, and lay there writhing.

"Anybody else?" Decker asked, pointing the gun.

The trio who'd been backing up Duke turned and started to run. The pair holding Benjy released him and followed.

When the patrol car came, in response to somebody who had heard Decker's shots, the two uniformed policemen found a mugging victim lying on the ground, and Decker holding Duke in his arms and, almost tenderly, mopping the sweat from his forehead before it trickled down to a bluish mark on his face.

Decker's first question was a strange one. "Got some scotch tape?" he asked. "I want to lift off some chalk."

It came off nicely, too.

After dinner that evening, Decker hung the picture. The rookie who stared at him from the frame had his points, but he could never have pulled off what Decker had done today. Too young. Too inexperienced.

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